Interview with Ronald D. Palmer

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR RONALD D. PALMER

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: This is May 15, 1990. This is an interview with Ambassador Ronald D. Palmer at his office at George Washington University. The interview is being done on behalf of the Foreign Affairs Oral History Program and I am Charles Stuart Kennedy. Mr. Ambassador I wonder if you would give me something about your background—where you come from, where you were educated, etc.?

PALMER: I am from southwestern Pennsylvania. My father's family comes from Fayette County and my mother's family from Westmoreland County. My paternal grandmother's family is from German Township which, as the name implies, was settled by Germans. Her family dates from 1760 in the region, my mother's family comes from Fauquier County in Virginia and settled in Pennsylvania in about 1900.

I was actually born in Uniontown, Pennsylvania. This was an area through which the Underground Railroad went from the early part of the 19th century until the end of the Civil War. Of course, some people say that the Underground Railroad did not exist until it was officially declared to exist by William Lloyd Garrison or someone like that.

Q: But it had to have been going for a much longer time.

PALMER: Oh, quite, quite. I think I may have mentioned that I have been doing some family history research and it is quite interesting to see the waxing and waning of the black population. You see families in the census which were simple farmers and ten years later they have slaves and free folk. It is quite clear that people are escaping from Virginia and coming up into that area from the South.

This area of southwest Pennsylvania was the area through which the old national highway went.

Q: The 1820s was...

PALMER: Yes, that is right. Before the railroad.

Q: ...the big public works of that period.

PALMER: Yes. And indeed, the area can rightly be called the first frontier. Certainly from the time of the founding of the Republic, probably until the time of the railroad in the 1830s.

So my family is a product of that frontier. Certainly there were African Americans but there were also Indians, Germans, Irish and at least one French progenitor. Of course this was also French territory.

Q: The period before Fort Pitt was put in.

PALMER: That is right. Well, Fort Pitt was Fort Duquesne. It is also an area of considerable interest to historians because, George Washington made two trips through that region before he accompanied General Braddock in 1755. Braddock was defeated terribly. Washington was lucky to escape with his life. Then, of course, Washington came back to Fayette County with General Forbes in 1758. Forbes had a larger and better organized force and, as you know, the French simply withdrew from Fort Duquesne and

it was taken by the British with their colonial helpers, after which that area was definitely British.

There was terrible Indian fighting, as you are probably aware. Indeed, you may recall Pontiac's War which followed the end of the French and Indian War in 1763. Pontiac's War ended in 1765 and was the last major effort on the part of the Indians in the East. Pontiac, of course, came from the Lake Michigan area. Following the defeat of the Indians at that point, the real fighting then increasingly shifted West with the second frontier.

Q: This is very interesting, but let's move on to your career. Could you tell a little bit of how you grew up?

PALMER: Actually, I was coming to that.

Q: Okay.

PALMER: Where I grew up, at the time I grew up, was still very much an area that was influenced deeply by the 19th century.

Q: You were born when?

PALMER: I was born in 1932. I remember very well, of course, that those were the days before electricity, indoor plumbing, etc. So my early life, as I think back on it, has certainly resonances of life as described in “Huckleberry Finn.” I was the young man out with his dog walking across the countryside, etc. I went to a number of schools because my parents separated when I was young and I lived with grandparents. But I was fortunate to be an intelligent child, one whom librarians and English teachers liked. So I was always the first one to be given access to the new books that came along in that period.

I want to make the point, not withstanding the Depression, that the schools in Pennsylvania were quite good, quite vigorous. I left Pennsylvania in 1942 to come to Washington, DC to live with an uncle who was a doctor and who had come from the same

region. So I was able to make comparisons between country Pennsylvania schools and Washington, DC schools. At that time Washington schools were quite good. Certainly, as I look back the Pennsylvania country schools were quite good too. I went to a 3-room country school in which initially I was in the third grade in a room with three grades. Then upon being promoted from the 3rd grade I went to another room where 4th, 5th and 6th grades were. I was in the 4th grade which was a row of children. Next to that row was another row which was the 5th grade and the 6th grade was the last couple of rows.

Q: I went to a school at one point like that.

PALMER: So, of course, the good student in the 4th grade, which I was, could complete his work and participate in the work of the 5th grade and possibly even the 6th grade. It was the Oak Grove School outside Standard Shaft Number One of the Henry Clay Frick Company which was a small mining camp of about 30 or 40 families. It was a good school. I had to walk a couple of miles or so. Of course, in those days one didn't think anything about it. Life has become more complex in contemporary times.

Through grade and high school I would say that the important thing to me was that I was always a reader and I suppose an obedient child. I was the sort of child who responded well to teachers...I responded well to good treatment. When I was given bad treatment I responded badly.

In high school I discovered athletics and became a mixture of athlete and student. Eventually I came down here to Howard University, Washington, DC, in December 1949 and began studying...1950-1954.

Q: What was your field?

PALMER: I was working on a laundry truck so I started university in night school taking whatever they had to offer. Initially the courses that were available were language courses.

I did French. Then eventually I started taking other things such as accounting and the like. For a while I thought I was going to be a business student.

The combination of working full time and going to school part time didn't work so eventually I turned it around to being a full time student and working part time.

I still don't see how I managed it. You heard me say that in the beginning I was taking one or more courses and somehow I graduated in four years with two majors and a handful of minors. My majors were French and economics. And I had minors in Spanish, government, and accounting. I finished in 1954.

Q: Sounds like you were ripe for military service or something like that.

PALMER: Well, that is very interesting. One thing I didn't mention was that Howard was under the Land Grant system and as a consequence I had to take ROTC. So, as long as one was in ROTC, one was not drafted. I was in ROTC from 1950-52. My last two years of college I was probably protected by some very nice ladies at my draft board who were aware that I was struggling, that I was a good student. They seemed to have found a way to fill their draft quota with people who were making, I must assume in their eyes, less of an effort than I was making because, although I was prime for the draft during the Korean War, I was never drafted. I finally had to get a draft deferment in 1954, after I finished Howard, because I became a Fulbright student in France and before one could go overseas you had to have a student deferment-a 2S. I studied at the Institute of Political Studies at the University of Bordeaux. I then went into graduate school at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies in 1955 and then got married in 1956. So I was one of those rare birds that did not get drafted. As a matter of fact, I started university weighing 220 pounds and finished weighing 170 pounds. I would have gladly been drafted, because I starved my way through university.

Q: What sparked your interest in foreign affairs and coming into the Foreign Service?

PALMER: A very interesting question. For one thing I was a little bit more exposed at an early time to the world outside the United States perhaps than some. I was going to high school in Mt. Pleasant, Pennsylvania, where my family had moved from Standard Shaft: It was a town of 5000 people. A librarian there started me reading the old Marshall Fields' newspaper called “PM.” As you recall “PM” was very much oriented towards foreign reporting. I didn't know at the time that it was supposedly a newspaper of the left or progressive persuasion, etc. I simply found that it had information about the world outside. As a consequence I became a high school newspaper reader. Now this doesn't always happen, as you know.

Then I went to Howard which was a very rich environment in those days because with the immigration to the United States of many Jewish and other refugees, Howard had its share of very able refugee professors. In addition, Howard had an extremely able and richly endowed faculty. Those were the days when Alan Locke, who was the Doyen of black intellectual life and head of the Philosophy Department; Mercer Cook, who went on to become Ambassador in Senegal was in the Romance Language Department where I was; Valaurez Spratlin was the Head of the Romance Language Department and had spent a good deal of time in Western Europe, especially Spain. Persons such as E. Franklin Frazer were their in the Sociology Department. John Hope Franklin was teaching history. Ralph Bunche had taught political science in night school until he had to go to New York with the UN.

There was a man by the name of Frank Snowden who was the Head of the Classics Department. While I was around Howard, he went into USIA and became Cultural Attach# in Rome. It was a very alive, diverse kind of environment.

Another side of the same picture was that I became an actor. The dramatic group at Howard was called the Howard Players. They went off to Scandinavia in about 1949...to Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. I joined the group after the European tour but we were

very worldly and grand. We did an excellent “Richard the Third” while I was there and I had the leading role in “She Stoops to Conquer.”

There was this connection with the world at that university.

A couple of other things. I knew a young woman who was an extraordinary person. Her name was Roberta Jacqueline Harlan. Her family was a very distinguished one. Her father was related on the black side to former Supreme Court Justice, Harlan. Her mother's sister was married to a Foreign Service Officer, whose name was Rupert Lloyd. At that time in the early 1950s, Rupert and his wife were in Paris. They had been in Liberia...this was during the time when black Foreign Service Officers could only be stationed in Liberia, the Canary Island, Madagascar, etc.

Because of that connection I became aware that there were such things as Foreign Service Officers and that this was a career opportunity.

I must say, as I look back on it, the impact of Ralph Bunche winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1949...I think it was 1949, made a big impact on me.

Q: It was just about...yes, because I remember he came and spoke at my college about that time.

PALMER: In any event, his career made a considerable impact on me. It was not that I knew how to have that kind of career, but that such a career was possible. Candidly, also, in those days, of course, there was segregation and opportunities for able blacks were very limited. It happens that as a consequence of trying to learn more about the Foreign Service because of the Rupert Lloyd association, I sent to the Department for the sample test and other information. The literature emphasized the fact that the Foreign Service was a merit service. I was looking for something which would judge a man on his merits and that struck me. So starting about my junior year, 1953, I began thinking about the Foreign

Service as a possible career opportunity. I actually took the examination in 1953—the old three-day examination.

Q: Actually three and a half days.

PALMER: Three and a half days, yes. I made, I think, an overall average in the fifties, let's say. It was a respectable 50, although you needed 70 to pass. It was clear to me that I could pass this examination. Obviously I was very young in comparison to others taking it.

I mentioned that I went on to France. I had put together enough French to enable me to speak it adequately before I went to France. Of course, being there I was able to improve on it. I was initially in Paris at the Sorbonne and then subsequently went to Bordeaux where I was ostensibly enrolled in the university and at the Institute for Political Studies. But I can tell you very candidly that I went to very few classes and I studied like hell. I had a regimen of working from about 8 o'clock in the morning till noon, taking lunch, and then working from 2 o'clock until 6 and then taking dinner and then working from 8 o'clock until I fell asleep. Oddly enough in that process I mainly worked on the United States. I worked on American literature, history and all those things I really didn't have time to take while at Howard.

During that time I applied to SAIS, the School of Advanced International Studies and was accepted. I came to SAIS in 1955. Then I took the Foreign Service examination in June 1956, passed it and was invited to come in. In fact I was invited for the class of February 1957. Even though the program at SAIS was a two-year program for the Masters, I was sick and tired of being poor, of the studying life and I bulldozed everybody involved into letting me graduate in a year and a half. I can tell you that when I entered the Foreign Service in February of 1957, they offered the officers at that time a free course at a university. Although I signed up to come here to George Washington, I went to one class and could not stand it. I literally could not read a book for about a year and a half after finishing graduate school. I am sure you know the phenomenon.

My first assignment was in INR. I have to tell you that my first assignment was actually to Security. Security back in those days was trying to professionalize itself. Trying to get likely people...I suppose my size had something to do with it...

Q: I can recall when I went in walking down the hall in the State Department where Security was, almost everybody's middle initial was "X" which meant that they came from a Catholic background and were basically Irish Catholic. I think they were trying to do something about it.

PALMER: I don't know, but I think they had asked for and obtained some sort of priority with regard to first-call on FSO entrants. However, I gather that records were passed around to other Bureaus as well and INR saw that I had a background of Southeast Asia. So Richard K. Stewart, who was a very fine man, saw my record and grabbed me. He was in charge of DRF, the Division of Research for the Far East, in INR. Hugh Cumming at that time was Director of INR. Stewart had a special place in his heart for the DRF crew. There is an official organization of DRF alumni and it meets every two years.

I survived and even did well in DRF but I was initially terrified. I came into an impossible situation where I was suppose to replace Paul Kattenburg. You may know Paul.

Q: I know the name.

PALMER: He is somebody you ought to interview. He is at the University of South Carolina teaching international relations. He was the Vietnam expert as well as the expert for Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, etc. Paul was one of those persons...Bill Hamilton was another...who had established a very, very fine reputation for DRF on Southeast Asia, but who had to go overseas because they had been Wristonized. So, there I was, 25 years old with a brand new Masters from SAIS with some work that I had done with Paul Linebarger on Southeast Asia but no practical experience, trying to replace experts.

Q: So your Southeast Asian background is from SAIS.

PALMER: Yes, that's right. However, I was dumped into this situation where there wasn't anybody with much background. I was given Laos and Cambodia. A friend of mine, named George Furness, was the Vietnam expert. We worked for Ted Tremblay. Ted had been in Thailand and in South Africa. In that period, Sidney Sober became the Director of that office. Sid took very positive, fatherly interest in me, especially, because the period 1957-59 was a very active one with regard to developments in Indochina. Particularly so in Laos.

In Cambodia, of course, as long as Sihanouk lives there will be activity, dust rising. But in the case of Laos this was a time after the Geneva Agreements of 1954 when the Pathet Lao of Prince Souphanouvong had split off and had gone off into the provinces in the North called Phongsaly and Samneua where he had established his base. In the meantime, his brother, Prince Souvanna Phouma, and such figures as Phoui Sananikone and others, were trying to develop a Liberal government, a non-communist government. It was before the time where eventually there was an intervention by the United States in 1958.

I happened to believe then and believe now that the Lao were best suited to solve their own problems, and that their problems were not generally susceptible to solution from the outside. Eventually there was a decidedly anti-communist government formed in which Prince Phoumi Nosavan from Savannakhet in the south of Laos played a major role. The whole situation became so unstable that you may recall that there was a gentleman named Konali who came to prominence about 1959 or so. By then I had left INR. But that in turn led to such an unstable situation that eventually there was a second round of Geneva talks under Averell Harriman which led to the 1962 Geneva Agreement.

Q: Going back to your role in INR, did you find that the Desk paid much attention, or was INR sort of making its analyses and all but not having much influence on policy?

PALMER: My experience was quite different and had something to do with the fact that Sid Sober, who was a man who had very good relations, contacts, with other parts of the Bureau as well as the CIA and the intelligence community, was there. It also had a lot to do with the fact that in those days, Marshall Green was the head of the Regional Office in the East Asia Bureau. As you know Marshall is a man whose mind is extremely open. He heard from somewhere, and I guess from the leadership of DRF, meaning Sid Sober and also Evelyn Corbett, who was one of my mentors, that there was this skinny kid in INR who knew something about Laos.

I recall very well that at a time when there was very real dissension within the intelligence community over what was happening and especially the amount of area that was controlled by the Pathet Lao...this would be about 1958...Marshall called me over to his office and I briefed him on what my reading of the situation was. First, that at that time the Pathet Lao was quite limited in what they controlled. What they controlled was a fairly small area of two provinces. And secondly, that there were large areas in between where there just weren't very many people. There were elephants, Laos was known as a land of a million elephants. But at that time the population was probably fewer than a million. The notion that there were invading armies and great battalions out there in the plains in my view was just not true.

Green took me with him to a meeting at the Pentagon where there was a kind of massive struggle over what the state of information was with regard to Laos. I recall being absolutely intimated because, as I say, here I was in my first job, the new kid, etc. We went to one of these vaults in the Pentagon where there was a bird colonel who was the doorman. It was his function in life. So we went in and there were the military types who all had one, two or three stars etc. Here was the poor little State Department with Marshall Green in his sack suit and young Ron Palmer, a black kid from southwestern Pennsylvania in his little sack suit.

People went around the room and when it got to be Marshall Green's turn he said that we think the situation is such and such. Then he turned to me and said that Mr. Palmer will provide briefing. So I sat up straight and squared my shoulders and laid it on the line, ending with the observation that what was being complained of, what people thought the situation was not the situation. Relative to the environment, yes, there was North Vietnam and its presumed capabilities but the actual capabilities of the Pathet Lao at that point in time were very limited.

Well, we carried the day. I suspect that what I have said is the sort of thing that by now has come into the public domain.

It happened that I got pulled off of my job in 1958 to go into the first iteration of what is now the Operations Center because whenever the coup in Iraq was in which, I think it was King Faisal...

Q: Yes, King Faisal. That was on July 14, 1958.

PALMER: What happened was that Hugh Cumming who was Director of INR, apparently that morning had not turned on his television set or listened to the radio and went to the Secretary's meeting which was around 9:00. John Foster Dulles turned to Cumming and was alleged to have said something like, “Hugh, what is happening in Iraq.” Hugh Cumming looked at John Foster and said, “I don't know Foster, what is happening?” Following this there was established a watch consisting of two men who came in after work from 5 until 1 and from 1 until 9.

Q: I was in INR doing the Horn of Africa in 1960 and I remember coming in early to make sure that the Director of INR wasn't going to be caught flatfooted.

PALMER: That's right. In any event, there was also this little group that read the cables through the night. Unfortunately, that group included some of the best young people in INR because the idea was to choose folks who were intelligent, etc. But it was dreadful duty

and as we saw it sort of thankless duty that I know several people who left the Foreign Service after that who could have been very able officers, but who just felt that it was a bad experience. This was organized out of the office of RCI.

After some time I was asked to work part of the day back at my old job and to continue this thing at night. That was just hellish. Finally I was chosen for language training, Indonesian language training in 1959.

Q: You went to Indonesia in 1960, is that correct?

PALMER: Yes.

Q: What was the situation in Indonesia then as you saw it?

PALMER: When I got there in 1960 there was still an awful lot of after effects of the departure of the Dutch. The Dutch had already left having been kicked out of the country in 1957 by Sukarno. By 1960 it is my very strong feeling that the Dutch residents, effectively most whites, had left. There was still a lot of upset with regard to just the normal types of things that are necessary with regard to running a city, a household, etc. There had been Dutch bakeries, a lot of the businesses had been run by the Dutch and were now taken over by the Indonesians. Some of them were running better than others.

It was a city that was somewhat dilapidated at that time. There were two hotels...the Hotel Duta Indonesia which had been the Hotel Des Indes, but used the same linen, had become quite decrepit. There was also the Hotel Dharma Nirmala. Believe me having visitors come to town was no picnic for them. In fact, sometimes when we would pick up official visitors and take them to their hotels, we made it a habit of going with them to their rooms so that we could see them. Very frequently they would be assigned to rooms where the plumbing was broken, there would be water on the floor, etc. The staff who were meeting airplanes developed the general habit of taking people home with them rather than putting them in those kinds of quarters.

God help the person who flew into the country without a contact of some kind or without having made some kind of accommodation because sometimes those people ended up sleeping in the lobby of the Embassy.

Q: This was your first Foreign Service post. How did you look at the government and how did you view our policy towards dealing with the Indonesians?

PALMER: Candidly, there was a problem then which I think still persists. That is that if you are assigned full time to language training as I was, ten months of Indonesian language training, you don't have a lot of time, you don't get much of an opportunity to find out what is going on in the country. So it wasn't until relatively late in my exposure to language training that I got the straight scoop as it were from the people who were on the Desk. I had read, of course, such books and information as was available on Indonesia.

But you recall things were changing very rapidly and as a consequence there really wasn't a great deal to prepare one for the fact that when you got to Indonesia that Sukarno was in the process of forming a personal base. He had already made his speech on Nasakom—nationalism, religion and communism—a tripartite approach to government. He had made other important speeches. There was one that he called “Manifesto Politik” (Political Manifesto). He also made a speech, possibly after I got there, called “UNDEK.” He was a great believer in acronyms. But these slogans became the building blocks of political life.

So, how did I feel about the situation? I came into Indonesia with an open mind. I had the great fortune of sharing an office with a man named George Kalaris who was assistant labor attach#. He was a very able man, we got on well. We talked a lot and he was very experienced. Through him I began to get an idea of the larger picture. But two things happened to me in coming into Indonesia. Again, I was dumped into a job that was bigger than my experience.

Q: You were what then?

PALMER: I was assigned to Jakarta as political officer, but the Embassy did some shifting around so I ended up going into the economic section. I replaced Robert Flanegan who went to the political section and left behind a job in the economic section that had been run by Donald Easum who went on to fame and fortune working on Africa, became Assistant Secretary, in fact.

Well, Donald Easum was a class-4 officer back in those days when I was a class-8 officer. He was doing a range of things that went from science, atomic energy to general financial reporting to reporting on the Sino-Soviet Bloc, political/economic penetration of Indonesia. It was an enormous range of things. It took me two years to find out all the things I was supposed to be doing. And, as you know, Easum is a very energetic sort of guy.

So I came into the Embassy as the youngest and greenest language officer. Invitations started coming into the Embassy for the Ambassador to attend the functions in which Sukarno was mobilizing political opinion. Ambassador Howard Jones, who, as you know, was a man who had a very benign picture of Sukarno and what was happening in Indonesia, was also out very frequently at night. He couldn't be out all night and all day also. Sukarno was just super charged with energy. So the invitations would come in and float through the political section, the economic section and finally find their way down to the most junior guy.

As it turned out this was like Br'er Rabbit being thrown into the briar patch because at a very young age and certainly at a point in my life when I was inexperienced I started going out two or three times a week to these political rallies that Sukarno was holding. As a consequence I saw at close hand organizations such as GERWANI, which was the women's movement, one of the communist fronts; SOBSI, which was the labor confederation; LEKRA, which was the cultural federation; and organization called, I think, PETANI, which was the agricultural workers organization. I had a chance to meet some of the major figures. I suppose I did meet people like Subandrio and others through this kind of thing. In addition, of course, there were the more non-communist, or even anti-

communist, public events. So I got the chance not only to meet Sukarno, but to meet virtually the entire Cabinet. I also got to meet General Nasution.

Q: He was Minister of Defense.

PALMER: At that time I believe he was Minister of Defense, although he may have been Chief of Staff. In any case, I always had a kind of easy relationship with military people. I had a chance to play a little tennis with him and some of his officers. I subsequently learned that the fellow who is now Minister of Defense and was the Chief of Staff in the Suharto government, whose name is General Benny Murdani, was a very young officer, and a ball boy at that time, remembers seeing me, although I don't remember him. Here again, I was just a kid but comfortably received in a circle in which there was Nasution, General Jani, who was one of those killed in 1965, and a wide range of the military leadership at that time.

Unquestionably it seemed to me that by and large the military was anti-communist. But it was not wise in those days to be overtly anti-communist simply because Sukarno's mystique was so broad and important and deep. The notion that he was on the right path for Indonesia was quite wide spread. The old sectarian politics, as Sukarno used to say, the 50 plus one politics, went against some very basic strains, values in the character and belief system of the Indonesians. Therefore the idea that there ought to be a way for religious forces, for nationalist forces and, indeed, for progressive, communist forces to get along in support of the nation was something that was very attractive to folks.

I spoke just now about political values. Two of the ideas that Sukarno expressed persist and are important values to this day in Indonesian political life. They are what are called musjarawah, which means consultation. Everybody should be heard. This goes back to concepts of village town meetings.

After musjarawah comes mufakat decisions. Musjarawah is the concept under which ASEAN operates—it is consensus in other words.

I have to say that while there were good people who believed that there ought to be a way that these forces could get together, there was never much doubt in my mind that the Communists not only had their own agenda but that their agenda was in the end a radically different agenda from Sukarno's. I feel this way today and I felt that way then.

Q: In the Embassy you had this Ambassador who was very controversial, Howard P. Jones. When you arrived there and while you were there, what was the feeling towards this man and his policy of staying very close to Sukarno all the time?

PALMER: There was disagreement. The disagreement by and large did not manifest itself publicly. This was before the days of the Dissent Channel, for example. But, without naming names, I can say that a considerable part of the political section didn't agree with Ambassador Jones. They felt that he was being lied to by Sukarno. They felt, as I just expressed it, that the Communists' goals were in fact a communist state. There was deep skepticism that Sukarno would be able to control this mechanism that he had created in which the Communists were structured in.

Well, let me not talk about them but talk about me. I felt that Sukarno was too inconstant. He was not the kind of disciplined person that was needed in order to cope with the Indonesian problems at that time. I want to underline the fact that the people that I met, and these would be rather more middle level people and who were or were not Communists, were very able people.

I have an historical conundrum to pose. There have been rebellions, Communist led rebellions in Indonesia, particularly Java, to the best of my recollection, 1926, 1947 and then 1965. Each time the Communist Party leadership has been cut off, people jailed and in some cases there have actually been pogroms in which a lot of people have been

killed. But somehow, each time the party grows back. How is that? Why is that? One of the reasons it seems to me is that there are conditions that exist especially in central Java in regard to class structure and the agrarian situation, etc. that seem to reproduce themselves over time.

How is it that this clandestine party that security people are watching out for and trying to control is able to prosper? Well, there is a long history of, shall we say a clandestine party. I don't doubt that there is a left movement, I don't want to call it a communist movement, that has come into existence as a clandestine movement since 1965. And, as a consequence, I can't say that I am totally sympathetic, but I know what it is that the government is trying to guard against and consequently why they keep people in jail and why they go very actively against movements that they think are communist because they all know that this has happened and recurred several times in this century.

It seems to me that unless some of the existing conditions are changed, there is a possibility that you could see it happening again.

Back in the early 1960s there was the appeal of idealism and one mustn't forget that communism does appeal to idealism. There was appeal to the idea of sharing. Again one needs to remember 19th century philosophy and that Marx grows out of that period's optimistic progressivism. And also that Marxism, socialism and communism, for some people represent modernism...a way of making a break from what they think is old fashioned ways of approaching problems.

So, was there a feeling in the Embassy that the Ambassador was wrong? Decidedly. I would say that it split between the Ambassador and those higher officials who were after all his men, and those of us who were younger and didn't have the kind of operating responsibility that he had. I read his book, “The Impossible Dream” and Ambassador Jones believed very fervently that Sukarno's heart and mind were in the right place and he believed he could control these forces that he had somehow encouraged to be developed.

God bless him. I think the evidence speaks for itself. To me 1965 really seems to indicate that Sukarno was prepared to throw in his influence with the left, the Communists, etc.

Q: Now, you had Howard Jones who was close to Sukarno, you had within the Embassy a feeling, and I know this was reflected in Washington too, that this was not American policy. Now, what type of Embassy did Jones run? Did he run a tight ship...you support me or get out? Or did he sort of allow a thousand flowers to bloom? How would you describe it?

PALMER: That is an interesting question. First of all, Howard Jones is one of the nicest men that you could possibly meet. A good man.

Q: This is what I have heard from everyone I have talked to.

PALMER: That's right. And he also had a very lovely wife. Good people. John Henderson was his DCM and he was a tough son-of-a-gun. If John liked you he could be very helpful, very supportive. I suppose if he didn't like you he could be a menace. Although he kept me in a fairly constant state of terror, we got along fairly well. I was a young man who nevertheless because of this crazy job with all these things in it, I had my share of exposure to the DCM, especially the work I was doing on the Sino-Soviet Bloc. Since the whole thing was controversial, I ended up often having to do the political writing myself and it would eventually get up to the DCM.

The thousand flowers. We were a very good Embassy. That political section included Burt Levin, who is now Ambassador to Burma, who reported on the Chinese and the youth movement, etc. I think his stuff was quite honest. So it got out that there were several possibilities. There was a benign possibility and a malign possibility, and you know, he was a very good writer and presented the cases very well. Robert Flanegan, who I mentioned before, was a very good reporter. All his work was on the external side, I think. Henry Heymann did the internal side, as I recall. He had a lot of experience there and did some wonderful reporting in terms of the situation.

So there is no question in my mind that these things got out. The chief of the political section was Roland Bushnell. There was another man there by the name of James O'Connor.

There was a range of opinion that went out of the Embassy.

In my view, I was in Washington sometime hence, and I don't think that it was all together a bad thing to have disparate views coming out of the Embassy, because I think when September 30, 1965 happened, I think that the people in Washington had a pretty good sense of what to do, which was basically not to do much, just keep your mouth shut, stay out of the way and let what I am convinced was a 100 percent Indonesian event take place.

Frankly, I don't think the United States had anything to do with that. It was a situation that was inherently unstable because there really was no way, especially for the religious elements in this situation, to get along with the Communists. The Communists and the nationalists had to be at loggerheads. And the army fundamentally was going to come down on the side of nationalism. So sooner or later something was going to happen.

So, back to your question. I thought I knew what was going on in Indonesia. I was close especially to the Canadians, and the Australians, the Germans and others and we talked. You hear me saying that I have a certain sympathy for what people were attempting, but that the reality simply did not permit it. Clifford Geertz has really got it right. He describes the class structure and the role of religion, Islam, in the countryside. You have two basic groups: those who are traditionally higher class persons who are landlords and who also tend to be much more religiously orthodox, and those who are of a less high class status who tend to be landless and less orthodox. He calls them prijai and abangan. This contradiction in the society remains to this day and over time you have this tension going back and forth.

I was duty officer in at least two demonstrations and on one occasion I was sent to the Ambassador's residence, this would now be 1962, when we got word that the Communists would strike either the school, the Ambassador residence or perhaps the commissary, all American facilities. As it happened the rascals came towards the residence and I was there walking up and down trying to look officious, etc. in front of the gate. A car pulled up and I was dumb enough to walk over and ostentatiously take out a big piece of paper and start writing down the license tag. Apparently it was enough at that time to cause them to go away.

It was after that that they got into the Ambassador's residence and burned some porch furniture and trash, trying to burn the place down. Life got very strange. You know there was this business about the school. We would get these reports to keep an eye on the school, that there would be a communist attack. That really upset me. I left in July or August of 1962. This was the time when things were really moving rapidly. The Asian games were coming up. It wasn't long after that that we had mobs presumably led by the communists sacking the British Embassy.

Q: Was that the time that a Brit bagpiped his way through?

PALMER: Well, he was marching up and down in front of their chancery, I believe, and people thought he was crazy. They apparently thought he was being provocative and reacted with great anger.

Q: Continuing interview of Ronald Palmer on June 22, 1990. Ron we had you leaving Indonesia. The situation had been rather difficult there. We talked about your involvement in trying to stop them from doing nasty things to the flag, the Ambassador's residence, etc. You left Indonesia that time when?

PALMER: I think it was July or August of 1962.

Q: Then you went directly to Kuala Lumpur?

PALMER: No, I came back to Washington and spent some months here. In fact I had home leave and was almost pulled back from home leave to work during the Cuba crisis of 1962.

Q: This was the missile crisis.

PALMER: Yes. But, fortunately, that passed quickly. Then we went out to Malaysia. I replaced a man by the name of Paul Miller in the economic section working for Kent Goodspeed. At that time Charles Baldwin was the Ambassador, Donald McGhee was the DCM, and Frank Underhill was the chief of the political section.

My work at the time was essentially on commodities, etc. The interesting thing for me was that there was such a contrast between Malaysia and Indonesia. Frank Underhill, as you know, was a marvelous drafter. He had written a series of very beautiful despatches, as they were called in those days, contrasting Indonesia and Malaysia as Indonesia being Huck Finn and Malaysia being Tom Sawyer and UK being Aunt Polly. It was very strange. In Malaysia you could drink the water, there was security everywhere, the food was excellent, etc. And frankly I enjoyed it. My wife found it very difficult.

Q: What was the problem?

PALMER: Well, you know sometimes when you are living in a stressful situation you are all set for dealing with stress.

Q: You are speaking about Indonesia.

PALMER: Yes, that is right. And then when that stress is removed, sometimes you don't function as well. This was my first wife. She had a nervous breakdown there and we then came back to the US in about June, 1963.

We passed through the Philippines at this point, she was at Clark Hospital. Clark at that time was a sea of army tents because of the casualties coming out of Vietnam. I had no idea of what was going on in Vietnam. This was June, 1963.

Q: This was before our major troop commitment.

PALMER: That's right. But there were by 1963, I suppose, something on the order of several thousand Americans in Vietnam. We certainly were suffering significant casualties.

Q: I wonder if we could return for a little glimpse of Malaysia at the time. Having studied the language, did you use it or was English the language you used?

PALMER: Malaysia was a very English pukka society at that point. One saw a good number of whites, Europeans, primarily British. It was still in the days of the British planters when planters would be in their rubber estates during the week and come into town, Kuala Lumpur, on the weekend and proceed to try to drink up all the beer in the country and do various other types of school boy things. There was lots of playing of rugby, etc. These were the days when the Selangor Club, the so-called Spotted Dog, was the center of the expatriate life. Those were the days when Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak were leading the country. It was 1963. It was six years away from the riots of 1969 when about 600 people were killed and when Tunku was forced to resign.

With regard to the language, in those days there were very few Malays who spoke English. So if you were going to speak to a Malay you almost had to speak Malay. The Malays that were in Kuala Lumpur tended to be in a very isolated area. Most of the people that one saw tended to be expatriates and, as mentioned, primarily British.

My most realistic experience in using the language was when I was sent in May, 1963 with Bob Blackburn, who has since left the Service, to make a tour up the east coast of Malaysia, across the peninsula and then down the west coast to sample opinion about the Confrontation that was going on with Indonesia at that time. So I had a chance in the days

when travel on the east coast of Malaysia was very difficult and when one had to cross about four or five fords by small boats, to see the country before it really changed.

It had already begun an evolution from the end of the British time, 1957, but Malaysian culture had not really taken hold so there was a kind of kaleidoscope. You could go from one rest house in one state to another and go from a place that still very much had a British character to a place where it was very quickly becoming Malaysian, including the food. One place would have wholly Malaysian foods, curry, etc. and another place would be strictly steak and potatoes in the British style.

All in all Malaysia was a delightful place in 1962-63. Kuala Lumpur deserved the name of Garden City as it was then called because it was very green. The British had gone to great pains to make Malaysia into a monument to their colonialism. But there was something antiseptic about Kuala Lumpur in those days. Rather like Singapore these days. It was just too clean and too good to be true, as it were. However, there was at that time a very lively night life that in its quiet way was probably akin to night life that was going on in other places in southeast Asia.

Q: How did we feel at the Embassy there about the confrontation that was going on with Indonesia?

PALMER: That period in time was an extremely interesting one. We felt that Indonesia was very much a bully and interloper. We felt the Malaysians were trying to do good things. They were trying to do everything right. They were going to school, they were trying to regularize and make life orderly in the post independence period. Indeed, the Malaysians faced some extremely difficult problems with regard to the integration of Singapore into the framework of what came to be known as Malaysia [I have been using the word Malaysia previously but it was not formed until the fall of 1963, I should have used Malaya]. We thought in the Embassy that the United States sided too much on the side of Indonesia.

Q: You had come from working under Howard Jones. Did he have horns in the eyes of the Embassy in Kuala Lumpur?

PALMER: Well, looking at it from the perspective of Kuala Lumpur, I found myself more frequently than not toward Indonesia, trying to defend American policy, indeed trying to defend the well known slant of the Embassy in Jakarta towards Sukarno. Often people would not give me very much of a hearing. Rather patronizing, then thought it was nice that I would seem to defend Embassy Jakarta.

You asked about Ambassador Jones. There was a certain amount of coolness one would feel in Malaya towards Ambassador Jones. He was known as Howard Merdeka Jones, as you probably have heard.

Q: No.

PALMER: Merdeka is the Indonesian word for independence and it was alleged at one point that Sukarno was asking ambassadors and others in his entourage to entertain. Ambassador Jones is alleged to have stood up and urged the crowd towards merdeka, the Indonesian goal.

Q: Now merdeka in the Indonesian terms not only meant independence but also meant taking part of Borneo. Is that right?

PALMER: It wasn't just Borneo. It was the whole area from the tip of Sumatra over to New Guinea. Yes, it did include the idea that the Malaysian or former British portion of Borneo might be freed, as it were, to have Indonesian sovereignty asserted over them. It is useful to remember that the area that is now called Sabah in Malaysia was the British North Borneo Company. The area called Sarawak had been, of course, the area ruled by Rajah James Brook, the white Rajah of Borneo. Brunei was ruled by the Sultan of Brunei who chose eventually not to go into Malaysia.

So these were, so to say, colonial leftovers in Borneo. In the final analysis, however, Tunku Abdul Rahman and the leadership of Malaysia were very successful in encouraging the people in Borneo to join the Malaysian Federation. There were those who thought this was a British confection and perhaps it was in the beginning. But as Tunku became Prime Minister and got further and further into the statecraft that was necessary to bring Malaysia into existence, one thing became very basic. The Malay population of Malaya, if one is to have only Malaya and Singapore, would be approximately equal to the Chinese population of the two territories together. To actually get a Malay preponderance, it would be necessary to include Sabah and Sarawak as well. That was the premise that I think the British had suggested the idea to Tunku.But it became a self-fulfilling prophecy because the issue of maintaining Malay political control was something very, very much on the minds of the Malay leadership in the early sixties. You may recall that this was a time of great emphasis on the question of Malay becoming the national language and various other manifestations of nationalism and emphasis on the Malay question.

I said earlier that there were riots in 1969. They were ultimately about the issue of political control. The formula had been that the Malays had political control and the Chinese had economic control. In the elections of 1969, what happened was that the Chinese almost won control of the state of Selangor which at that time include Kuala Lumpur. Political leaders on the Malay side appeared to encourage or at least egged on Malay radicals who attacked Chinese and this led to the May 13 riots at that time.

The critical thing and we can come back to this later on in these conversations, is that the Malays were then and remain quite sensitive to the issue of political balance between them and the Chinese.

Q: Looking at it at that time, how did we feel at the Embassy concerning the “communist menace”?

PALMER: Communism in Malaya was a very real thing. Communism, of course, in Indonesia was real as well. This was after the emergency which ended in 1960, but the Communist Terrorists, as they were called, were still operating in remoter areas of the country. It was known that they would come across the mountainous spine of the country down from Thailand, where they had a sort of safe haven, and would infiltrate into various areas of the country.

The issue of communist menace looked at from the perspective of 1990 does not have quite the dramatic coloration that it had in the early sixties. In the early 1960s communism and the issue of Asian communism and the possibly that communism as an organized force could extend from China down to Thailand, down to Malaya and across the Straits of Malacca to Indonesia, was a very real...I shouldn't say fear, but was regarded as something that could happen. It is easy to forget that through most of the fifties and certainly well into the sixties, the issue of whether communism or anti-communism was going to prevail in most of the third world was a very open question.

I don't want to get too far ahead of my story at this point, but I will tell you right now that if you speak in man-to-man terms to leaders of Singapore or Malaysia they will tell you that the US intervention in Vietnam gave them time to organize their societies and to protect them from becoming communist.

Q: This is a contention which I have to admit my prejudice. I think there is validity in this idea that maybe it didn't work completely in Vietnam, but certainly it allowed the whole area to solidify.

PALMER: Again, I don't wish to sharpen any historical, rhetorical swords. But I believe that if things had come out differently in Indonesia in 1965...that is to say if the pro-Communist coup of September 30, 1965 had turned out so that the left had won instead of being defeated, as it were, and the PKI and all the forces it represented had gotten control of the

country, I just don't know what the impact of that would have been. It would have been a very considerable political impact in the region.

Q: Let's move on then. You came back to the Department in 1963.

PALMER: I went into the Operations Center and was working the day that Jack Kennedy was killed, was working the night of the coup in Vietnam, etc. It was a fairly early time in the life of the Operations Center. I worked with Ed Djerejian, Jim Placke, Allen Wendt and others. Felix Bloch was one of the people I worked with.

Q: Felix Bloch being right now indicted as a spy suspect with considerable attention as a Foreign Service Officer.

PALMER: Yes.

Q: From the Operations Center view, how did you respond to the Vietnam coup—November, 1963?

PALMER: When Diem was overthrown and killed?

Q: What does somebody do in the Operations Center when something like that happens?

PALMER: Typically in those days when you start getting information that something is happening the normal response was to set up a working group. I can't recall at this time who the members of the working group were, but I do recall that for a fairly long time, a man name Bill Brubeck, who was the number two in the Operations Center, seemed to be there pretty much by himself. There was a great deal that was mysterious about what was going on. I don't mean mysterious from any negative point of view. It was simply that the nature of the regime that was run by the Diem brothers was very secretive and our contacts with them were...I wouldn't say limited because one of the most difficult things

in those days was trying to make sense out of the long cables that were sent in about conversations with Diem.

Q: You were supposed to boil them down and get them off to somebody?

PALMER: Well, function in those days was as an editor. An editor was responsible for three things. At night there was the Top Secret Summary which went to the Secretary of State and a few others. In that you summarized the most important happenings of the night. There was a daily summary as well and that was put out around 11 or 12 o'clock and was the same kind of document. We also edited “Current and Foreign Relations,” which was a Secret publication which went all over the world. I read things for the purpose of seeing whether or not they could be or should be summarized. There were two other persons on the team—the senior watch officer and his deputy—myself as editor and one writer in the course of the night.

So, the thing that one felt about this Vietnam reporting of what was going on there was that it was very scanty. There was very little in the traffic that would lead you to suggest before the event that the United States was perhaps involved in a coup against Diem. But there was a lack of feel of a need for information in the course of the night as this was going on. Because, typically as something happens you have cables going back and forth as to what is happening. There was just a lack of that sense of urgency about this as if somehow somebody knew what was going on.

Q: You then became a staff assistant...for whom?

PALMER: For Lucius D. Battle who had been Special Assistant to Dean Acheson. That was in the period 1964-65. It was the heyday of the Fulbright Program. Battle, particularly, wished under the Kennedy aegis to use the program to do many of the things that were there to be done in terms of educational and cultural affairs. It was very touching after the

death of John Kennedy...Bob Kennedy was interested in this program, but was especially interested in something called the Youth Committee. You may recall that.

Q: Oh yes. Every Embassy was told to designate youth officers and you had to be young in order to be a youth officer. The idea was to get out to meet young, potential leaders.

PALMER: That's right. Bob Kennedy was absolutely sincere about this. It was very close to his heart. I saw him a couple of times because there would be Youth Committee meetings chaired by Luke Battle. Bob Kennedy would come over and there would be others from State and other agencies. I remember him as a very unhappy man, a man with a crust of sorrow that you could cut through. Not too long before he had a major run in with President Johnson, I recall him saying in the most gentle way possible that we put out papers and get reporting, but nothing was happening. Things were still the way they were. What is wrong?

A part of what was wrong was the whole notion of the Youth Committee as a means of moving conservative institutions. The concept was to somehow get in touch with the “government-after-next” so we would know who the people were and be prepared. But, obviously, there is a government in place today. If you happened to be in Venezuela or some other place like that, the government of the day often does or did not like efforts on the part of the Embassy to make contacts with folks who sometimes they thought were subversives, etc.

I recall this feeling that there was something we could do at the University of San Marcos in Lima, Peru. This is the middle sixties. Peru today is the home of the “Shining Path” guerrillas who adore Mao and the most extreme radicals conservative. So it may have been that there were conditions in the world in which the best American exhortations could not really be successful.

Q: One of the things I noted too was this idea that because the Kennedy Administration put an emphasis on youth...I remember in one of my interviews talking to somebody who

said you had to be very careful in assigning people to deal with Bob Kennedy because they had to be young. There was this feeling that somehow youth was going to take over and many of the countries twenty years later had the same leaders running for power. When I was in Yugoslavia at this time, Tito was in and twenty years later, Tito was still in. It was admirable, but very unrealistic.

PALMER: I think you are absolutely right. I was working in the Operations Center at the time of the US intervention in the Dominican Republic. I was absolutely recently shocked to observe that Juan Bosch is currently a Presidential candidate.

Q: The two who were fighting at that time...Bosch and whoever the other one was...1964 just had an election. We are talking 1990 and the same two candidates are running against each other. It is not the way the world works. There is a core of an element of validity there. Obviously you want to get beyond the people in power, but this was sort of wishing to make it so.

PALMER: That is true. Having said that, I still think a very admirable effort was made across the world to get to know people...especially to put the best of our people together with those we thought were some of the best in various countries.

One thing that I just want to underline is that at that time the Cultural Presentations Program was under Luke Battle in the State Department...I can't recall the name of the individual who ran that program, but I do recall that such individuals as Isaac Stern, Jose Limon, the ballet dancer, Dizzy Gillespie, and people like that were identified back in the sixties as those who we wished to send out abroad.

In addition there was the American Specialist Program. I recall John Cheever and other writers went abroad.

Q: But I think it was much more a reaching into the cultural world of America rather than to send out the same old tired hands. It was a shaking up period.

PALMER: By definition it was a very alive time. There was the coming together of two streams...the stream of history descending from World War II and the post-war period and the stream of the future. I can recall very well also the question of civil rights...marches, problems with James Meredith and others...because we had many foreign students at the University of Mississippi and other places. You had the sense of living in historic times. At least I did.

Q: On the Cultural Affairs program, because this really was the height of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States and I know I was abroad in Yugoslavia and it was very hard to explain. We were having riots in cities and having marches, etc. How did this operate within the Cultural Affairs program?

PALMER: I can remember that we sent Oscar Hanlon and his wife. He was a great historian and sociologist. This was a time when the State Department was somehow able to pull some of its greatest people and best minds in the United States to support our efforts. Perhaps it was Luke Battle himself. However, I think it was a time when the establishment was a very vibrant and self-confident institution in the United States. And in those days, John Gardener headed the Advisory Commission on Educational and Cultural Affairs. He went on to become head of Health, Education and Welfare.

Q: And later head of "Common Cause."

PALMER: The distinguished educator Mabel Smythe, an African American, was on the Commission. Luther Foster, the great President of Tuskegee College was on the Advisory Commission as was the head of "Time-Life." I can recall that Ralph Ellison, who wrote "The Invisible Man," came down to talk with Battle. You had this sense of the best people in America trying somehow themselves not just to understand but trying to help the process.

I would like to mention that in the spring or thereabouts of 1964 that a man named Harry McPherson succeeded Battle. Battle went out to Egypt as Ambassador. Harry C. McPherson, Jr. who subsequently became Special Counsel to Lyndon Johnson, came over to State from the Pentagon where he had been Deputy Under Secretary of the Army.

After Walter Jenkins had his breakdown, which would be early 1965, McPherson went to the White House to succeed him and became not only a speech writer, which he was, he was literally Special Counsel. He wrote a number of the major speeches that Johnson gave on civil rights, on Vietnam, etc. Ultimately McPherson became a part of the group that tried to persuade Johnson that the war in Vietnam was having very unfortunate and damaging results in terms of the American society.

In any case, I want to suggest to you that for a young man, and at that a young black man, this was an extremely vital period and especially a vital cultural period. It was interesting and energizing for everybody.

Q: As you say there was a supercharged feeling at that particular time which began to get sour later on because of Vietnam and anti-government feeling, etc.

PALMER: One thing that is very difficult now to explain to kids, is that there was an atmosphere of optimism in the post-war period of the 1950s. There were lots of bad things ...segregation, you could still get killed in the South for being black...but there was somehow the notion that things were going to be put right. Remember that Roosevelt had been President for most of our lives from 1933. I was born in 1932. In the Truman period somehow one was aware there were good people and good things were happening and could happen. There was hope. For many liberals, and I count myself as an American liberal in the traditional sense, the fifties in the Eisenhower period was a time of a certain amount of chaffing, but you still thought things were going to come out right. The first intimation that things were not going to come out right was when Jack Kennedy was killed. The country had fallen in love with Jack Kennedy and everything seemed possible.

Fear sunk in that perhaps things would not come out right. Then as the sixties went on, it seemed increasingly that some of the best people were getting killed.

Q: Kennedy, Martin Luther King, Bobby Kennedy, etc.

PALMER: Yet it was because of McPherson that I was assigned to Copenhagen and many good things opened up for me. The idea was that more youthful, energetic officers ought to go into the cultural affairs field. I was sent to Copenhagen in 1965 as a cultural affairs officer, largely as a kind of experiment. I don't know what the past had been as regards to the experiment, but I was sent to Denmark as a kind of new cultural affairs officer. I did my best in that responsibility, but above all I tried to infuse the type of energy that perhaps was unusual in the field. I also had great areas of cultural ignorance, which I tried to do something about diminishing.

As cultural affairs officer I was responsible for the Fulbright Commission budget of almost $200,000, which was a lot of money in those days. I got valuable management experience.

I was given 100 hours of Danish language instruction before the assignment. I never spoke Danish well but it helped me make contact with the worlds of theater, dance, music. I had a wonderful time for two years in Denmark. I liked the Danes and they liked me.

Denmark, of course, was a very interesting place from which to look at the United States. I was in there in the period 1965-67, which was a period of great enrichment in terms of relationships between the United States and Denmark. There had been a very deep and warm relationship already because a number of Danes had come to the United States and done quite well, especially in California but elsewhere also. Bunkie Knudsen, who had been Chairman of General Motors, was a great hero in Denmark. Indeed there were many Danes who were in the Detroit area who had become involved in the motor industry in the 1920s and 1930s. There were, of course, also important figures like Victor Borge...

Q: Pianist turned comic.

PALMER: It is funny, I think Borge is much more appreciated in the United States than he is in Denmark because his style of dead pan humor for the American is very funny but I think the Danes find it rather less funny. I had the pleasure of meeting all of these people. A great pleasure that I remember is meeting Lawrence Melchior, the great Wagnerian tenor, who by that time was rather old but still very lively. Melchior was a man who enjoyed his schnapps and beer. He was a lovely, cheerful, bright, pink cheeked man who it was a great pleasure to be around.

Q: Were you having problems at this period with the youth culture and the more leftist ones because of the Vietnam War or had this...?

PALMER: I was heading in that direction because I was making the point that there were a number of these people who were already great friends of the United States, but they tended to be somewhat older. At that time the real problem was to make contact with those who were younger and somehow try to develop the same kind of feelings and relationships between them and the United States the older folks had. I threw myself into this with great energy. For a period I was making a speech every couple of days on Vietnam and the United States. I also had a lecture presentation that I developed called, “Negro-White Relations In the United States,” which I gave at the student club in Copenhagen and also at Aarhus University in Tutland.

I think the main thing that was in my favor in Denmark was that I made friends with several people who in turn helped me to make contacts with others. One of those people was a man named Sven Auken. He was married to Bettana Heltberg who had written a book at about the age of 20 or 21. She presently is the cultural editor for the great Copenhagen newspaper, “Politiken.” Sven has become a leader of the Social Democratic Party. He has a chance perhaps to become the Prime Minister one day. We have kept up our relationship. I went to visit them several years back in Denmark.

He was at the University of Aarhus. I got to know students there and talked to them. We brought cultural presentations to the university there. I had student friends at the University of Copenhagen and also at the student club there in Copenhagen. They would have parties and I would be invited. We would talk. The Danes have a very lively and sharp sense of humor and irony. I doubt that I convinced many who were to the extreme left, but those who were moderate left were prepared to listen. I think many people understood what the United States was trying to do. I think there were people who differed with us on our methods. Obviously there were many Americans who felt the same way. The critical thing is that people were prepared to listen.

Q: I would like to move on now. You left Copenhagen in 1967 and then you spent two years at West Point as a faculty member there. What were you doing there? How did you relate to the upcoming military officer? This was during the height of the Vietnam period. There was strong political control over the war there and the military was feeling sort of tied in. There was a lot of resentment about the State Department because they felt the diplomats were screwing up the battlefield.

PALMER: It was precisely for some of these reasons that an FSO position was established at all of the service academies. U. Alexis Johnson was the father of the concept. Jim Rosenthal was the first person assigned at West Point from 1965 to 1967. I succeeded him. The idea was fundamentally that the military and civilians were not speaking the same language and therefore it would be useful to have a civilian diplomat in front of graduating seniors for at least a year so they could become accustomed to the way civilians thought, etc. I fit into what was at that time a very structured curriculum. I taught comparative political systems in the fall semester and in the spring we taught international relations. All of us taught the same thing every day so a student could be tested by any of us and the same results could be obtained. I say “we” because I was in a group of captains and majors who taught the same courses in this structured curriculum.

How did the student respond? I had my best success with students who were in the so-called “middle.” Very frequent testing of cadets studying the same material produces a rank order. I was given the people in the middle who are typically very hard to get motivated. I was able to motivate my people and am very proud that in my second year of teaching comparative political systems the top man in the senior class and the number three man were students from my classes. Their exams were graded by other officers that corrected the exams of students taught by others. So it meant that the ability was there in my students and I had motivated them to study.

That led in my last semester to my being given the first section of the international relations course. The first section, as you might expect, is inhabited by the best and the brightest. I had the good fortunate of having boys who responded to me, who were very bright and could take any idea you had and run with it. West Point, as you know, is the home or at least one of the homes of the Socratic Method and classes are highly discussion-oriented. So it was just a wonderful experience to teach such bright minds. But I have to tell you at the same time, this was the spring of 1969, and that at least one of the very nicest boys, a former Eagle Scout and the kind of lad you would want your son or grandson to be, was killed by his own men. This was the time of '69 and '70, '71 of so-called fragging.

Q: Fragging was when one's own men would throw a fragmentation grenade into a bunker where officers are.

PALMER: Two of the boys who I had taught were killed by their own men. It is hard to imagine these days. It goes back to the premise that you postulated at the beginning of this segment, that the war was deeply divisive. I must say that among my colleagues at West Point were professional soldiers some of whom had already had two tours in Vietnam. I didn't run across any professional soldiers who didn't understand why we were

in Vietnam. I did run across a number of people who did not like the tactics that were being followed.

I went to Vietnam in 1968 and for a period of about six weeks with three infantry officers we did a study of pacification support. This was a program aimed at helping everyday civilian life proceed. We visited all four Corps areas, but particularly we visited Australian troops, Thai troops, Korean troops and Filipino troops. These outfits by and large had different missions. However, at the stage at which the war was in July-August, 1968 very few of these units were taking part in active, search and destroy operations. They were occupying areas.

I developed a very basic notion about the Vietnam War during that process of going around the country which was that the war was about who was disrupting life the least. Very frequently that was the Viet Cong. This was not because they weren't brutal, but because our tactic of search and destroy operations tended to be very disruptive of everyday life. The second observation was that the war was also about whose orders from a central command could get to the front line the fastest and be obeyed. And on that matter there wasn't any question. That was also the VC. In short, orders could be issued in Hanoi and those orders would come down the line and get to the unit at the end of the line and be obeyed. Whereas in the case of the Government of Vietnam and its operations, sometimes from Saigon even to the Saigon outskirts, orders could be issued and not be obeyed.

I think Francis Fitzgerald's book, “Fire In The Lake,” is a very instructive book in thinking about the Vietnam experience.

I was happy at West Point. I made many friends and contacts with whom I have maintained contact to this day. A man I came to know and respected a great deal was General Sam Koster, who at that time was a Major General and Superintendent of the Military Academy. He was reduced to Brigadier General because he had been in charge

of the Americal Division at the time of the My Lai operation. General Donald Bennett was another superintendent.The man I worked for was Joe Jordan who went on to fame at the Center for Strategic and International Studies. But the man who hired me was General Abe Lincoln, who many people know about and who was loved by the people who worked with him. George “Abe” Lincoln was a great man.

Q: Were you under any particular fire from the professional officers who were also part of the staff because you were a diplomat?

PALMER: Many of my colleagues had had two tours in Vietnam which means they went out their in the early 1960s as an advisor and had gone back in the mid sixties as a unit commander. Often they had won high decorations for bravery. These people understood that the war was a lot more complicated than the simple business of just bombing the whole country and turning it into a parking lot, as General Curtis Lemay had recommended. Indeed, I found officers who actually had fighting and combat experience tended to be extremely professional. If sent, they would fight and do whatever they were told to do, but their minds were open to argument. Many of them had questions about the type of war that the United States was fighting in Vietnam. Therefore it was not so much a question of the State Department that was a problem with them. They sometimes questioned the civilian leadership of the country. They were not rebellious. Some simply believed the type of military instrument that the United States defense establishment had created was in some respects ill suited to the circumstances of Vietnam. You couldn't get from here to there.

Q: You went from West Point where?

PALMER: Back to the Department of State and became Deputy Director of the Philippine Desk.

Q: Let's talk about that. That was 1969-71. Then from 1971-75 you were political-military officer in the Philippines. When you came on the Desk what was the situation in the Philippines and what were our interests there?

PALMER: I came to the Philippine Desk at an extremely interesting time. President Nixon was going to East Asia at that point. I came on the Desk about July at a time when the papers were being put together for his visit to Manila. That was an extremely interesting introduction. I did a fair amount of the writing of some of these papers.

My first real introduction to the fast-track bureaucratic world was the receipt of a copy of a memorandum from Henry Kissinger to the Secretary of State.

Q: Kissinger at that point was head of the National Security Council.

PALMER: Kissinger had written to the Secretary to say that there were many people in the Philippines who thought that the bases were a major problem in our relations and that we needed to have a study of the value of the bases and the various legal and political issues involved in operating them. This task fell upon me in 1969. So I had to organize from the Desk, the legal, political/military and the political responses to questions that were raised. Frankly we did the writing of the original papers on the basis of which negotiations were commenced in 1970-71. It was fairly clear that we had more base land than we needed. A lot more because as I recall in those days Clark Air Base was 130,000 sq. acres, or something like that.

But there were also questions about the extent of our unilateral control and jurisdictions (I do not mean criminal jurisdiction). It seemed to me that it was possible to contemplate the issue of joint control, joint operation, etc. Although some of those concepts were not really further developed until the 1976-77 negotiations under Ambassador William Sullivan, they actually had been in place for some time before that.

The Philippine Desk in 1969-70 was an extremely active place because at that time the Marcos government had been in place since 1966. There were a lot of things being attempted in regard to future relations as well as an effort to try to deal with some of the lingering post-colonial problems. There was sugar, which is always a problem with the Philippines.

Q: What is the problem with sugar?

PALMER: There is the question of the sugar quota. The sugar issues in general are one of the more complicated and sticky problems. There are questions about tariffs, quotas. As it happens a good deal of the Philippine sugar is also finally processed in the United States. So there was always that.

And there were questions about the coconut levy also. I forget now exactly what the issue was, but there is always a problem between soy bean oil which is produced in the United States and any oil that comes from the outside. Coconut oil, of course, has sought to have a place in the US market for some time, just as palm oil has more recently. Let me tell you, the soy bean lobby is a very implacable enemy to have.

Hemp is another issue. It has now been replaced by plastic. There were issues also about the so-called Laurel-Langley Agreements under which Americans had the rights of nationals to operate in the Philippine economy.

So I had two very active years working under Dick Usher, a very fine man, who basically let me carry on the question of inter-Departmental negotiations which was handled by the Under Secretaries Committee in those days. The Under Secretary at that time was Elliot Richardson. The man on his staff who was responsible for these papers was Arthur Hartman. So I was able to meet those people and work with them early on.

I was recruited, if that is the exact word, for the Embassy in the Philippines by Hank Byroade, Ambassador Henry C. Byroade. Byroade handpicked his staff. The Deputy, the

number two, was a man by the name of William Hamilton. Frank Maestrone, who went on to become an ambassador, was the political counselor and I was the political/military guy. Terry Arnold, who later on was a terrorism expert, was the chief of the economic section. Frank Ready was the Admin Counselor.

Byroade basically said to us as a group in 1971, “I recruited you, I got you because you are suppose to be among the best at your trades in the Foreign Service. You have my blessings so go out and do your jobs. I won't look over your shoulder. If you need me I will be there. But basically I expect that you will be able to do whatever it is you are supposed to do.” It was the most exhilarating, active, energetic, fulfilling kind of experience.

Q: What was the atmosphere...we are covering both the time at the Desk and in the Philippines, 1969-75...toward the Marcos regime? This was early on. Later he has fallen into great disrepute. How did you look at it and was their a difference between how you saw things and the official line at the Embassy?

PALMER: I think one way to understand the Philippines is to reflect on what happened in the decade of the 1960s. Recall that Richard Nixon when he was out of government was very well received by the Philippine government. In those days he was working for Pepsico and he had occasion to travel around the world. Whenever he would come through the Philippines he would be extremely well-treated by the Philippine people. A general characteristic of the Filipinos is that they are very hospitable, generous folks, Nixon never forgot that they had made an effort to be helpful and pleasant to him. So that when he became President the Philippines always had a place in his heart.

There was no question in the staff in the Embassy, either before or after I got there, that Marcos was one of the good guys. He came to power in the elections of 1965, and was thoughtful and intelligent. He was like politicians elsewhere as honest as he needed to be. But there was little of the great stench of corruption that attached to him in later years.

While I was on the Desk there was a period, I believe it was 1970, when neither the President nor anyone close to him at a political level could travel. This was the time that Imelda Marcos' Cultural Center in Manila was to be inaugurated so Nixon called upon his good friend, Ronald Reagan, to go to Manila to represent him. So at that time I was able to talk with Michael Deaver about making the visit for the Reagans as successful and pleasant as possible in Manila. And believe me, the Filipinos can make a very pleasant visit.

Byroade got on very well with Marcos. They were men who understood each other. I will even venture to say that it was my impression that Marcos looked up to Byroade who was a very experienced officer. Byroade, as you know, had been the youngest man to make general since the Civil.

Q: He had been a West Point officer who...

PALMER: He came out of West Point in about 1938 or 1939 and went to China where he built roads and airfields for Stilwell. It was in that process that he was promoted very rapidly. He also became very good friends with Zhou En-lai. Eventually he was the Chief of Staff for Marshall on Marshall's mission to China. So Henry Byroade was a man who was handsome, was popular, both women and men as well as his staff liked him. He was well suited to getting along with Marcos. They were men's men together. I think Byroade used to play some golf with him, etc.

So, there was a rather macho atmosphere between the two. You know that Marcos was macho and we had a manly Ambassador that had already proved himself. This was his fourth or fifth Embassy.

Byroade was a man who got around the country, who liked the people, who would go out to parties and enjoy himself. He set a kind of standard so we were all very active in the life of the country. Most of us developed relationships with the Marcoses and their supporters

and family as well. In fact, when Ambassador Sullivan came to the Philippines in 1973, after martial law was declared, and I will come back to that... I used to go with him to play a game called pelota (like racket ball) against Marcos and his bodyguard. I certainly was not on intimate terms in the way that the Ambassador was with the Philippine leadership but I had good relationships through the entire Marcos establishment including General Ver, the head of the Presidential Security Guards. I also knew many of the leaders of the opposition.

Martial law was declared in September, 1972. It was the case in 1972 that things felt quite serious, quite bad somehow. There was a certain amount of communist activity. There certainly was the Muslim fighting going on in Mindanao, that few people remember now, which was very, very bad in the early seventies. The atmosphere was depressing. Through the summer of 1972 there had been unusual typhoon activity. Central Luzon was under water; it was raining cats and dogs and this kept up for weeks and weeks on end. It seemed to me that the country, the people and even the government to some extent became depressed, as you will in that kind of setting. There was almost a palpable sigh of relief when martial law was declared. There was no question that Ferdinand Marcos was the most popular man in the country for a good long time after the declaration of martial law.

One of the first things that he did under martial law was to have a person who was trafficking in heroin taken out and shot with television cameras looking on. That led very quickly to the drying up of black market sale of heroin. This is an important point because it looked as if there was going to be an epidemic.

You may recall there was a heroin epidemic in Bangkok in this period which touched the International School there. It touched the school in Manila as well. There were men who were literally giving candy to kids, small children, which had heroin in it. Obviously after the child became accustomed to that they were asking for money. There were several children at the Manila International School who developed a heroin problem.

So there were many reasons why martial law was popular. There was a feeling that the President was somehow going to take hold of things.

Another thing that was very popular about martial law was that there was a curfew. The curfew was initially put at 12 o'clock. The Philippines has traditionally not been very easy to govern place. Manila has been spectacular in that regard. There was a good deal of weapons carrying. First, the martial law authorities said that anyone carrying weapons would be subject to severe penalties of law. Second, the curfew was absolute—anyone caught out after 12 o'clock would be jailed automatically.

This had several results. One, the level of violence went right down and two, the Philippines is after all a Latin-influenced society and there had been a certain tradition either from Spain or from Latin America, of the mistress, the duerida. With martial law, daddy really had to get home by 12 o'clock so Marcos was very popular with the wives.

I left the Philippines in 1975, Marcos was still very popular then. Martial law was still going on. The curfew had been put back to 1 o'clock in the morning, but it was seriously enforced. I recall once when I was duty officer I had to be out after the curfew and one could feel quite nervous about being out there as the only car on the road.

Q: I was in South Korea from 1976-79 where they had a 12 o'clock curfew. We all liked it for many of the same reasons. We had teenage children and knew where they were.

Now one last question...two questions I would like to ask, what was your impression of William Sullivan, the Ambassador? Was he there long enough while you were there to compare him to Byroade?

PALMER: I had two years of William Sullivan. I suggested to you that Byroade was very much Chairman of the Board. Or perhaps another way of saying it would be that he was very much a general. He kept control of the overall strategy but basically he gave his commanders field authority. I am using a military analogy here but it is one that applies. It

seems to me, he was like a confident businessman also. He delegated authority. He was very self-confident. He had twice weekly meetings. A Tuesday meeting and a Thursday meeting. The Thursday meeting was a larger one, the country team meeting. His Tuesday meeting was really for chiefs of section or senior officers. It was a very informal kind of meeting. I thought the world of Henry Byroade and think the world of him now.

I found him a delightful person, someone extremely good at engendering high morale in his officers. He expressed concern about me at one point before martial law was declared because I had come to know some of the senior Filipinos and was getting invited to all kinds of parties being given by folks who had Marcos or at least Imelda in their social circle. In those days the Philippines unfortunately resembled Madrid more than a tropical country because the party would be given and dinner often wouldn't be served until after midnight. So I was getting home at 2 or 3 in the morning because you couldn't really leave these places early. So he said to me once, “Look, I am being paid to do this, but I don't really like it all that much. You have a very heavy job and I know that you get to the office early. I can sleep and get my rest, but you need to be careful about burning your candle at both ends.” That really touched me. I said, “Well, you know, I really don't know what to do.” [As political-military officer I was chief on the American side of the bases joint renegotiation committee. I was chairman for the American side for the Bases Joint Labor Committee, the Criminal Jurisdiction Committee, etc. All of these activities involved people at the colonel level from the bases and we would get together at the bases or they would come to Manila. Also we had some very vexing problems with regard to criminal jurisdiction that sometimes required terribly long and complicated negotiations. So I was really working my tail off.] So I said to him, “But I am meeting all these people and they are being very responsive. What should I do?” He said, “Well, I guess you just have to grin and bear it.”

So, along came Bill Sullivan, who had a daily staff meeting at 8 o'clock every day. Although martial law had cut back on social activity somewhat there were still plenty of activities making a 8 o'clock staff meeting every day very hard. In addition, he had his

secretary come along to note actions assigned at the staff meeting each day, all of which were to be completed by close of business that day. Well, the Philippines was a hard place to have this kind of managerial style because there was a good deal to do every day. I don't know where he had developed this management style, but there were very few things that you could tie up by the end of the day in the Philippines.

I had known Sullivan for years because he was working on Vietnam back in the late sixties when I was working on the Philippine side. In any case at one point, Nathaniel Davis, who was a very able officer who became Director General, was trying to interest me in studying Russian and working on the Soviet Union which in those days was a fairly elite kind of FSO activity. I recall going to a party in the early sixties where Sullivan was.

So we had a very good man to man relationship, but as manager to subordinate our relationship was clouded. I had gotten along very well as an independent operator under Byroade, but with Sullivan he wanted a much tighter control on Embassy activities than Byroade thought necessary. His man in achieving this tighter control was Skipper Purnell, Lewis M. Purnell, who was the DCM. Purnell came to the Philippines with a very Indonesian perspective, being used to a different kind of atmosphere. Actually he and Sullivan had the view that the bases were the problem in bilateral relationships between the US and the Philippines and the way to improve bilateral relations was to get rid of the bases (this is, of course, a gross simplification of their views, I assure you).

Well, I was inclined to their view, but it was 1975, not 1990, and we were only recently out of a fighting role in Vietnam and the question of our stability, what our word, our commitment, our credibility were worth were very real. People were worried whether the US would stay in Asia. So, I found myself in a very difficult position with a man who in a jocular way, and sometimes not so jocular way, basically had the view that the bases were getting in the way of development of a good relationship between the United States and the Philippines. I was very much like the boy who was holding the dirty end of the stick. I felt very strongly that the bases needed to be maintained, that we needed to

find a way eventually to walk away from the bases relationship but not at that time. I was in agreement that sooner or later, however, this would be in the interests of both governments.

Q: We are talking about that on your watch there Vietnam had fallen...

PALMER: Well, Vietnam fell in 1975. By then Bill Sullivan and I had sorted things out. I had had two years with Byroade, 1971-73, in which I had very fine evaluations and had a great experience. My third year I got very poor marks and I had to write a rebuttal in my evaluation because I took it as a matter of fact that I had been brought there essentially to work on the bases. Whereas the concern of the DCM was that I was not doing enough in the terms of more general political-military reporting. Frankly, Skipper Purnell and I did not get along.

But as time went on, as it were, my personal relationship with Sullivan got better and better. My chief of section was Frazier Meade. I got along very well with Frazier, but he was trying to do what the DCM wanted. I was also but our priorities were different.

It is funny, a friend of mine who has known me since I went into the Foreign Service, saw me recently and we had a good chance to talk. He said that I was well-trained but possessed of more independence than was typical of FSOs of my generation.

So I am very sympathetic to whatever it was that Skipper wanted to do with me. Perhaps he wanted to mold me to make me more a person to go in the direction that he felt would be more useful for me. Yet, I was then an old O-2, as was Meade, and Skipper's way was not mine. More than that I am sorry to say that if the Ambassador's policy was to speed up the relinquishment of the bases, my own concept was that it should be done as slowly as possible.

So, I may claim success that perhaps I shouldn't claim. My attitude towards some of these issues that had to do with the bases was when in daily meetings the Ambassador would

say to me, “Ron, what about....?” I would say, “Bill, what about it?” He would say, “Well, it is terrible.” I would say, “Well, you know it has been going on that way for about 20 some years. There are things about the way in which things are done here that just don't bear too close looking at. There are rocks that you don't want to pick up because you won't like what is underneath. There are practices which have developed that are just historical practices. They are not neat but it is the way things work.” He found that very difficult. His quite proper attitude was, “I don't want them to work like that, I want them to work in a neat and rational manner.”

Q: You were operating on a good American saying, “If it ain't broke, don't fix it.”

PALMER: And, believe me, we were working with 17,000-18,000 American servicemen of whom say 12,000-13,000 would be at Clark, and 5,000-6,000 would be at Subic, with wives and children living outside the bases in Olongapo, which is near Subic, or in Angeles City which is adjacent to Clark Air Base. There were many opportunities for vice and various other kinds of problems. It was an untidy situation just by definition.

At one point one issue that made Bill Sullivan very unhappy was the issue of Camp John Hay. Camp John Hay was situated in Baguio, north of Luzon. There was a very small Air Force establishment there and a runway. The three most important features at John Hay were the slot machines in the Officers' Club, the Officers' Club itself, the Base Exchange and a golf course. Most of these facilities were used by Filipinos. He said, “Why is that?” I said, “It is because John Hay is the price we pay for being in the Philippines.” Let it suffice to say that he didn't like that.

Q: What you are saying here Ron is something I think we have all run across...the tendency for the new man to come on board and try to tidy things up. In many cases it is best not to tidy things up. It is uncomfortable but this is how things work. If they are really not out of control, you almost have to turn a blind eye to them if you want to do things well.

PALMER: The thing is to understand. However, understanding takes longer than most people realize. Understanding can take months before things sort of fall into place. Since Sullivan, I believe, honestly liked me as I liked him, he gave me an increasing amount of leeway. I know he wasn't happy with me, but he gave me a certain amount of rope to hang myself. All this time I was working, working, working, trying to get him not to see things my way, but to develop that sense that things were here a long time before he got there and would be there a long time after he left.

Finally I developed the notion of him going to spend some time at John Hay himself because there was a very lovely house there for the American Ambassador. When I said before that the cost of doing business in the Philippines was John Hay I mean literally that if Marcos or other leaders wanted to spend some time playing golf, have a beer or visit the PX, or whatever, they had cards that permitted them to do that. There was a certain amount of control kept over this whole business by the local base commander and his commander at Clark. It was again one of those things that one had to live with.

So I was finally able to get the Ambassador to go and visit Baguio. He found the golf course wonderful, the house wonderful and he went back again before too long. I am not exaggerating when I say that after a while his attitude towards John Hays changed. He met Filipinos there and saw that there were reasons that John Hays was useful to us even though things were untidy. In time he came, to use the metaphor that many Filipinos had used with Byroade, that pulling out almost had a kind of sexual decoupling kind of meaning in the case of the Philippines. This was wasn't Germany or Japan, this was emotional and it would take a while to sort things out and telegraph our intentions in such a way that we would not be disruptive.

So things finally got to the point in terms of our relations where he would have me advance his travel which was very unusual since I was the political/military officer and not the political counselor. I went to Ilocos Norte in the north which at that time was being

governed by Marcos' sister to prepare for a visit by Sullivan. We had a great time...two Irish politicians. Then I went south to Mindanao to do the same thing. Great fun.

So my fourth year, my second year with him, was a much more positive year. I had four wonderful years, but I thought my third year was going to kill me because Bill Sullivan was a man who, if he respected you, would get along with you, but if he got down on you, life could be terrible. He got down on the defense attach# and I had to do his work in some respects, including when the Commander-in-Chief, CINCPAC came to the country. I ended up being the escort officer, which is obviously a defense attach# type of job. Similarly they had me being responsible for the Joint US Military Assistant Group because of the political/military function and because they could work with me. I really got stretched to a fairly-thee-well in this experience.

Q: In your contacts, what was your impression of the Philippine military at that time?

PALMER: I thought then and I think now that Eddie Ramos who was the head of the Constabulary at that time was a great man. He was a West Point graduate as you know. He is the Secretary of National Defense in the Philippines. (He is presently the President of the Philippines.) I knew most of the other commanders as well. I would say they varied. There were some who were probably better tennis players than they were military officers. It was clear that it was better to be stationed in Manila. To get the equipment and support for the operation that was going on in Mindanao it was probable that some officers were better off being in Manila in terms of being able to get that support. I did have the feeling though that the people who were fighting against the Muslims were at the end of a very long line and it was not always clear that they got the support, perhaps even political support up the line that they should have had.

So, at the field commander level I thought many of them were really quite outstanding. Some of the senior officers seemed to be quite good, some were corrupt which was quite

evident. On the whole, my impression of the Philippine military was not as high as that of the Indonesian military.

Q: Were you there when Vietnam fell?

PALMER: I was there when Saigon fell.

Q: How did this reflect itself? What were you doing?

PALMER: When Saigon fell, we started getting vessels...it is relatively not far from the Philippines to Vietnam.

Q: What kind of contact were you getting from our Saigon Embassy because obviously you were going to be the first port of call for anything that happened?

PALMER: We were reading the newspapers. I obviously didn't see the cables because they were held very close. It was not obvious until quite late in the game. There was a moment when the whole central highlands fell and it was clear that there was nothing blocking the advance of the North Vietnamese troops or the Viet Cong forces. It was pretty clear then that the war was coming rapidly to a conclusion.

We started getting people telephoning us from Vietnam, especially from Saigon trying to get their friends out. They were trying to get help from the Philippines and our Embassy to send in aircraft and boats to get people out. For most of that period I was sitting in Manila. Had I been at Subic where the impact of refugees and the movement of such ancillary forces as we had in the region out of the theater occurred, I would have been more involved.

I do recall after the pull out occurred seeing Ambassador Graham Martin walking like a ghost up and down the halls of the Embassy in Manila outside my office on the second floor. I think he was a fair, pale man in any event, but he was as white as a sheet and

seemed to be in shock. It was quite striking to see him because he had come to Manila a refugee, and only days before he had been the American overlord in Vietnam.

We had to deal, frankly, from the perspective of the US Embassy in the Philippines The US had important interests in the Philippines. The US hold in Vietnam was broken but we were still in the Philippines and we had a legal basis for being in the Philippines. The bases agreement called for us to use the bases in a certain way. The fall of Saigon was an unusual situation and for those reasons we were able to prevail upon the Philippine authorities to allow boats, aircraft, etc. to come into the Philippines along with lots of people. But it was a very strange situation from the Philippine point of view and they were sensitive about their sovereignty.

Looking back, I think the Philippine Government deserves considerable credit for being as supportive as it was at that time in terms of responding to the situation of people coming out of Vietnam.

Q: This is interview 3 with Ambassador Palmer. Today is October 1, 1990. I think we stopped just when we were finishing up with the Philippines. You then went back to Washington for about a year's stint with ...

PALMER: A year.

Q: Doing what? This would be 1975.

PALMER: I had been proposed as DCM at a couple of places and as chief of the political section in Ankara, but senior assignments are traditionally very difficult because there are so many people chasing so few posts. I had a phone call from James Wilson who had been named the Coordinator for Humanitarian Affairs who asked me whether or not I would be interested in working with him. My response was immediately yes. He said I would be doing something called human rights.

Q: This was before the Carter Administration?

PALMER: Oh yes. This is 1975. It was, in fact, the effort by Congressman Don Fraser in the House to begin trying to get some consideration for human rights matters into our assistance programs. In the first case it was an amendment to the Security Assistance Act.

I came back to join Wilson's staff and I was one of a very small group at that time as far as human rights were concerned. There was Charlie Runyon, who you may have heard of, who was in L (Legal Office) and who was a long time supporter of human rights issues. There was someone in the Bureau of International Organizations, Warren Hewitt. There was George Lister who continues to work on these matters in the Bureau of the American Republics. And that was about it.

In the first instance, country reports had been requested by Jim Wilson from all of the country desks in the Department. So my first problem was to confront this huge pile of country human rights reports with a view of trying to get them ready for submission to the Congress. That was one side of the job.

The other side was to attempt to expand the knowledge of human rights in the Department as to what the legislation required and also to try to sensitize people to the new human rights environment.

Q: What was the legislation?

PALMER: The legislation was a relatively short clause attached to the Security Assistance legislation which required reports on the conduct of human rights, the observance of human rights, in specific countries. At that time there were no sanctions, penalties or anything like that. It was simply a request for information. What had happened was a man named John Saltzburg was working for Congressman Fraser and John was very closely in touch with the human rights community, including Amnesty International and the International Committee of Jurists. They had promoted an effort to get information,

perhaps authoritative information, on human rights observance, in contrast to the information that Amnesty and others had gotten in the past which was from private people.

Since it was very clear that the Congress was going to be increasingly involved in this activity, it was necessary to us to get it across to people in the regional bureaus that the question of what governments did with their own people, which traditionally had not been something that the US had opinions on, was now something to which we were going to pay greater attention.

As you might expect, I ran into a great deal of resistance. Not so much resistance, but a rather unbelieving attitude. Some of the things that were going on in Central America, in Latin America, the Middle East, and many parts of the world, particularly behind the Iron Curtain, etc. were matters that were beyond the control of the American government to do anything about. It was nevertheless the case that it was clearly something that the American government was going to be taking a greater interest in, so I did the best I could. Rather like Willy Loman in “The Death of the Salesman,” I had my clean white shirt and a shine on my shoes going from door to door.

Q: With a smile on your face.

PALMER: With a smile on my face.

Some of the people in the Department got the message very quickly. Of course, there were areas with human rights matters were of great concern...Chile, Argentina were particular examples. We also were getting pressure from both foreign groups and from the Iranian community here in the United States on issues such as Savak (the secret police during the time of the Shah).

I discovered fairly early that there were problems with regard to issues in which the Secretary of State took a deep interest. For example, in some respects Secretary Kissinger was almost like the Desk Officer for Iran. He had a very deep, close interest in

Iran. I don't want to suggest that he wasn't interested in human rights concerns, he had a much larger concern which was the possible role that Iran might play as a hegemon in the Persian Gulf region.

Q: This comes out in other interviews that we were giving in many instances almost a blank check to the Shah of Iran which came right from Nixon to Kissinger to everybody else...don't talk about the opposition and the problems in Iran. Did you have the feeling that you were coming up against this?

PALMER: Well, you see, I was so weak bureaucratically. I had a charter, but I really couldn't do anything to anybody except talk to them.

Q: Of course, this was the very beginning. This is how things start.

PALMER: That's right.

Q: You weren't getting the feeling that you had a lot of clout with a Secretary who was out pounding...

PALMER: I would go farther than that and say that I was told that the issues in Iran, and indeed issues in South Africa, Chile, and Argentina, were issues of great political interest, great policy significance in which there was a very real sense of the 7th floor, the Secretary's staff being involved in these issues. Therefore I was a pretty small fish in a pool where there were much larger fish. Nobody told me not to do this or that. As a consequence I kept on...certainly not with Iran because it was really removed from everyday kind of consideration...

Q: I assume we are also talking about Israel too or had Israel even surfaced as being a problem involving the Palestinians?

PALMER: Actually, all of these issues were put on the table as a consequence of the reports. The reports were nowhere near as searching, decisive, deep ranging as they are now. Nevertheless, we did the best we could the first time around.

Q: But each time one adds on and you hone them...

PALMER: That's right. So if a problem existed it was at least written down in a human rights context. For example, I recall being amazed in 1975 at the number of countries in Latin America that were under a state of siege where martial law was in place and constitutional processes were suspended, etc. That was a fact of life in the seventies. By the same token, I discovered that there was a community of interest in both the Chilean problem and the Argentine problem. That is to say those within the State Department who wanted to make progress on those issues within those countries. So, I am back to the image of Willy Loman going door to door, etc., but finding people here and there who were quite supportive.

Interestingly, along the way one of the persons who I found to be a great help was a woman named Sandra Vogelsang, who at the time was on the Policy Planning Staff. I talked with her and she made it possible for me to brief the Policy Planning Staff. I talked to Winston Lord, who was in charge of the Policy Planning Staff, and ultimately, in the fullness of time, Lord became interested in developing either a speech or some speeches for Kissinger on this subject. In the Kissinger period the medium of the speech was often the way in which a policy was laid out or policy changes were indicated.

In that process of going to the country desks, calling meetings that brought people from the various Bureaus, etc., I developed a relationship with Philip Habib, who at that time was the Deputy Assistant Secretary in the East Asian Bureau. I think at that time Arthur Hummel was the Assistant Secretary. Habib was deeply involved in the South Korea issue. The government there was suppressing its people. It wasn't just Korea though, there were issues that were very bothersome in the Philippines.

I somehow must have made a small impact. It wasn't a question necessarily that I was terribly useful, although I tried to be useful, it was more that the human rights dimension started providing another way to get at some of the issues in bilateral relations which could be dealt with positively.

Q: Well, there must have been a significant number of Foreign Service officers who had been dealing with these various countries who were concerned over the fact that we were being so pragmatic over matters that we were overlooking accounts of torture, etc. and must have welcomed a chance to get some of this out.

PALMER: To take your point and perhaps expand it a bit, I think there were people who took a very long look at the Vietnam experience and began to wonder about some of our allies, clients, etc., who were lacking a fundamentally humane approach to their own people in terms of the way in which governments were being conducted. If those governments did not proceed more or less correctly and improve human rights observance or whatever, there was a danger that a lot of the effort and the treasure that we had expended might be wasted, might not have the result that the American people had a right to expect.

Therefore, I see this initial period of the human rights effort being a kind of expansion of the palette of possible inputs that we were able to use in dealing with the international situation. Recall all this was happening before the Carter Administration. Now when the Carter Administration came in, when our Principals would meet with the leaderships from other countries, human rights would be very much on the agenda. It would be something that would be discussed in the normal course of bilateral discussions. Well, obviously there had to be a foundation for that. It didn't happen over night.

I would say this about the Kissinger State Department in that year 1975-76: I suspect that the Secretary wasn't all that comfortable with the human rights issue complicating problems that were already very complicated. By the same token, it seemed to me that

there was nevertheless an atmosphere that was not negative. I repeat, nobody ever told me not to do this, that or the other. On occasions though I was told that I just couldn't get next to the problem so I should conserve my energies.

I count as perhaps one of the more successful elements of this period, 1976, I believe it was, the meeting of the OAS in Santiago where the Secretary gave a public speech for the first time on the issue of human rights. So I definitely felt progress was being made.

Also, I mentioned South Africa a while ago. If you look back in time there was a great deal of effort and investment made in that period of 1974-76 in trying to find institutions within the black community in South Africa that the United States could support.

Let it be said that I know I got my first Ambassadorship because I had tried to handle this very explosive, dynamic human rights question with a certain amount of discretion. I also tried to do something. I tried to move the issue bureaucratically and I guess the fact that the Ambassadorship came after this was an indication that I had a certain amount of impact. I think notice of my work got to Larry Eagleburger when he was Under Secretary for Management and a very important person in the State Department.

Q: And the right-hand of Kissinger too. Did this come as a bolt out of the blue?

PALMER: Absolutely. I recall being scolded by Phil Habib because he saw me dragging around the building obviously dead tired. I think I ran into him once when I was returning from the Hill. I was being beat over the head as to what State wasn't doing, etc. So I ran into Habib who, as you know, had had heart attacks. He said, “Palmer, what is wrong with you?” I said, “I am just beat, tired.” He said, “What are you doing?” I told him and he said I was working too hard. This from Habib who was a workaholic's workaholic. I guess in the course of the that year he became Under Secretary for Political Affairs.

Somehow word of my work got into the inner circle ...Eagleburger, Lord, Habib, etc., because I recall I was parking my car downstairs in the State Department one morning and

Dick Fox, who was at that time in charge of PER/FCA (Foreign Service Assignments) said, “You know you are on a list.” I said, “What?” It seemed they had been looking at a group of good men for Togo and I think Habib's reaction to it was that they were good but why not put some younger men on the list. So in that context my name got put the list and I was chosen and went off to Togo in the fall of 1976.

Q: What was the situation in Togo when you arrived in 1976?

PALMER: Well, it was very interesting. This was after a high point in Third World activity in Africa where the North Koreans had been quite involved in trying to bring resources and their methods of organization to African states. They did some work in training the Presidential Security guards and in Togo and the like. They also sought to put a much more sharp anti-American emphasis on the policies of the governments where they were working, including Togo.

I came into the situation where this kind of propaganda had been going on for a bit. Togo was a very, very militantly third world country. Still, I found that the Togolese President and I managed to get into a good man-to-man relationship...

Q: This was whom?

PALMER: This was General Gnassingbe Eyadema. Eyadema had been in the French Foreign Legion and had fought in Indochina and I think in Algeria. He was finally demobilized and sent home around 1958. When he and a few others who had been in the French forces came back the only experience they had had was being in the military. At that time Togo did not really have an army. So the government which was headed by Sylvanus Olympio, probably didn't handle these returning veterans as smoothly as they should have. Eventually there was a coup in 1963, the first in Africa and Olympio was killed. Eyadema and the other military people withdrew after the coup. Olympio was succeeded by Nicolas Grunitzky from 1963-67. Finally the Army mounted another coup

and took over in 1967, Eyadema became President. So Eyadema has been in power from 1967 to the present, 1990.

I don't think he went beyond the 6th grade, but he was a man who has a great deal of common sense and who, of course, has the background of having worked and served in the French Army which is a very, very tough environment. He had a vision for his country, to try to develop it. His methods were authoritarian, but nevertheless he sought to develop the agriculture of the country, the infrastructure, its industries. And he has had a fair amount of success in that effort. There has also been a relatively stable political situation in Togo, although there have been continuing incidents between the people of the North, the home of Eyadema, and the people from the South, the Ewe, who are quite different culturally. This problem is not resolved. Nevertheless since 1967 the country has enjoyed relative stability. It aspires to become the Switzerland of Africa.

While I was there I worked on trying to improve US-Togolese relations. I had some success in that. I worked as well as trying to make an input in the development issues of the country. At that time we had an AID officer in the country, but I had a vision, myself, of trying to do something both with regard to water availability and also questions of health care. I was able to make progress with both of those issues.

On the bilateral relations, as my tour was coming to an end in 1978, an issue came up at mid year of possible cross border raids by mercenaries. I alerted the President at that time, having gotten the information from other security sources, and then after a couple of months, I believe in September, there was another very strong report. I went to see him and told him that this information had been received. He didn't believe there was such a threat but I said that he should probably take security precautions in any event. It was some time after that that a person was picked up in Switzerland who said he had been a part of this mercenary force which had in fact come over the border in the earlier alert to make a reconnaissance and had been prepared to come across in force at the September alert. However, when they ran into heavier security arrangements they turned back. All this

appeared eventually in the magazine “Jeune Afrique” and a couple of British newspapers. As you might expect, that led to a great warming of the relations between myself and the people there.

Subsequently Togo went on the Security Council and I think the relationship has been quite a sound one between the United States and Togo since then.

Q: Did you find yourself either competing or trying to thwart the North Koreans?

PALMER: No, by the time I got there I think the enthusiasm for their methods had already passed. Among other things, their methods and ideas went counter to a fundamental reality which was that Togo wanted to have a solid relationship with France. However, you may recall at the same time there was an effort on the part of Zaire to extend its influence politically, organizationally, to as many states as would accept their influence. The Zairois political party had been organized by the North Koreans. The Togolese Party called the Rassemblement du Peuples Togolais, RPT, had been also organized along these sort of mass front lines. But I think when the Togolese asked the North Koreans for resources, they didn't really have any to offer. So I suspect by the time I arrived that was already in the process of change.

The relationship between Eyadema and Mobutu has been and remains, I suppose, a very warm, very close relationship for reasons that have to do with being old military campaigners and friends.

The Togolese political party and the Zaire political party have a certain resonance between them. I would say that Togolese single party has been a fairly useful method of mobilization of people in the countryside.

Q: What was America's policy towards Togo outside of having “good relations?” Did we feel that this was an area which France was going to play the predominant role and we would stay back a bit?

PALMER: I am not sure I can give you a very precise answer to that question. Recall 1976 was when the Carter Administration came to power. I had been in the country really only a short time, but the Carter Administration had a positive attitude towards Africa. They had a positive attitude towards doing something meaningful in South Africa. Somehow we were made aware as chiefs of mission that all of our countries counted. The resources were not unlimited, but the Carter Administration let us know that there would be efforts made to be helpful and supportive to Africa. Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs Dick Moose and our Ambassador to the UN Andy Young led this effort.

There was a real effort to change the perception of the Africans that somehow the United States didn't care about them and was mainly interested in the South African issue. This was left over from the Kissinger period. The policy was to try to get the support of all the Africans for the things we were seeking to do in Africa which we felt genuinely were in their interest. In addition to the South Africa issue, which was harder, more difficult, there was also Rhodesia, what became the Zimbabwe issue.

Togo, of course, occupies an unusual position. It is a member of the Entente which is led by the Ivory Coast. It includes Niger, Burkina Faso, what used to be called Upper Volta, Benin, Togo and France. This was an effort to try to deal with that part of the world as a region.

In addition, Eyadema became one of the fathers of what was called ECOWAS, the Economic Community of West African States, and he has continued to have a very significant interest in and impact on ECOWAS. There was nothing as definite as Eyadema becoming a figure of importance as the country is too small; yet, there was the concept that Togo counted for something. I had very good feedback on my reporting of what was going on. And, as I mentioned, in due course after I left, perhaps as a consequence of these several things, I don't know, we gave our support to Togo to go on the Security Council, which obviously indicated the US had respect for Togo.

I went to see the President on all the issues that counted for the Carter Administration during that period. He would give me very sound and solid support and advice. He was always very insistent on the fact that we ought to do more than just talk about the issues such as South Africa. He wanted the US to put more resources into Africa. I don't know what was happening elsewhere, but I do know that we had a good interlocutor in Togo.

Q: For the benefit of those not familiar with the Foreign Service, how does an Ambassador work in a relatively small country in Africa?

PALMER: Togo at the time had 2 million people. The city of Lom# had about 150,000 people. Of those 150,000 in the town, probably only 2,000 worked for the government. It was possible to get to know all of the Cabinet people and a good number of the people in what you can call the political elite.

I had relatively limited resources, but I did have the Peace Corps which I felt was the best one in Africa. There were about 100 volunteers who were all over the country. We developed an excellent program of working on mini-projects. We could build a school at that time for $5,000. The Embassy at that time had some self-help funds from the State Department, money you could give to localities and villages, to help supplement the use of their own resources. Therefore, schools, health buildings and even small roads could be built.

One of my major efforts was to identify the United States with this developmental process, especially with our small scale program, because France was the major provider of credits and assistance. At that time the Togolese had a windfall of money that had come their way as a consequence of the increase in commodity prices in the early and mid 1970s. They exported phosphate rock which was one of their very few exports. They actually had some cocoa and coffee exports show up in their figures but these were actually items that came from Ghana and were reexported through Togo because the Ghanaian currency at that time was not strong.

So, through the Peace Corps, I had contacts throughout the country. Whenever there was a school opening or something of that sort, I would go and spend perhaps a morning or an afternoon with the people there.

I mentioned water and schools and health earlier. Our effort resulted in people who were walking 5 or 10 miles to school having a school built within one or two miles. On the water side, my metaphor for the African experience is the woman carrying a jar of water on her head, often two or three times a day and often walking long distances to get the water. We collectively tried to do what we could to make water points more accessible to people than had been the case previously.

We did what we could to promote trade. We did not see many American businessmen but I had a constant litany of requests falling upon me from both the local trading community and from the government. They would want to see more American businessmen because by then they had become much more sophisticated and were aware that French prices were high. Moreover, often US items were being sold by the French after being manufactured in France under license. So they clearly could do better by getting some of those items like heavy equipment, directly from the United States. Unfortunately although there were some US bank representatives who came through and some businessmen, promoting US business was really quite difficult because there just wasn't American interest.

I took the view that it was important to make contacts in the military because it was after all a military dictatorship. I had developed a sound relationship with the President. I suggested that it would be useful for some of his people to have experience in the United States and get to know the American logistical system, etc. He blessed an effort that began with the training of some of his people in the United States.

What I am suggesting is that on a daily basis there would be a certain amount of office work to be done, but I spent a good deal of my time visiting people in their offices,

getting around the country and ultimately becoming a part of the group in Togo that was concerned with issues of development. We succeeded in having the American Embassy considered to be a part of the process in which there was an effort to do positive things in the country.

Q: You left there in 1978, is that right?

PALMER: Yes. I was back on leave in Washington and ran into Harry Barnes, who at that time was Ambassador to Romania. He had been named as the new Director General. I had known him because he and I had served on a promotion panel some years before. We exchanged some views about personnel matters. He got in touch with me after taking over as Director General and asked me to come back to take over Foreign Service personnel with a view to eventually becoming one of his deputies. I did that starting in July, 1978.

In the first year I worked under or for Nancy Rawls, who previously had been Ambassador to Togo and who went on to Ivory Coast and afterwards died of cancer. I succeeded her in the Deputy Assistant Secretary job in 1979 and became part of the group that was trying to put together the Foreign Service Act. I worked very hard on that, but my major concern in that time was that Barnes looked to me to run the Bureau of Personnel. That was a very large, full time occupation because he spent an immense and increasing amount of his time working with Under Secretary for Management Ben Reid and a working group of others who were concerned with the Act.

I believed in what they were attempting to do. I felt at the time they were trying to go awfully fast with a great number of changes, which I supported. However, I thought they were trying to change too much too quickly. I had some concern about the fact that the Foreign Service had been running for some years with a certain degree of success under the 1946 Act. I didn't really feel that the Service had been adequately prepared for the changes that were coming.

Q: What were your major concerns in running Personnel? What were the major problems you had to deal with?

PALMER: There was very strong view on the part of Read and Barnes that more discipline had to be instilled into the personnel system. The idea fundamentally was that we didn't have the luxury of people refusing to take assignments, that we had to get a closer fit between Service needs and the particular talents of the individuals to fill those needs. That was one issue. A second issue generally was one of professional development. I don't really feel that the kind of progress I would have liked to have seen was made on the latter issue.

Q: What do you mean by professional development?

PALMER: Professional development is entirely an issue of training. It fits into another issue which was very important and remains important, the issue of affirmative action. It is my strong belief that the best way you get affirmative action for those who need special help, in this case I think women and minorities are generally in that category given the culture that has existed in the Foreign Service in the past and I think continues to exist, is that you have to help everybody. Everybody can benefit from training,

The Foreign Service has little training. I won't say no training because it does have the course given at the beginning of your service, the A100 course, which is usually three months. There is language training and there can be special training like economic training. However, I was then and I remain a strong believer in the fact that there needed to be a mid-career course, a significant and meaningful course, that would take people out of the trenches and give them an opportunity to prepare for both the responsibilities at the middle level and certainly begin looking ahead at the responsibilities at the senior level.

There is virtually no training at the middle level and such training that exists at the senior level is for a small handful of folks who get the chance to go to the War College or to

the Senior Seminar. There were, in the past, some opportunities for people to go into university training, but I don't know how widely that opportunity exists now. It just seemed to me that the traditional attitude of the Service that really good people didn't need training, that the training took place at the work place, was not good enough.

This seemed to me to represent an attitude towards the type of person we had been fortunate enough to get in the past who perhaps socially, culturally, perhaps even educationally, had a very special kind of background and experience, especially those who went to the great schools on the east coast. Increasingly though that was not the product that was coming into the Foreign Service. The person coming into the Foreign Service, white or black, male or female, often was not a person who knew how to write in the Foreign Service style. Those few people who did were highly prized, highly sought after.

Also, there may have been a time when people might have come in with a kind of attitude of command or the kind of background that was just a matter of waiting before the individual who was 21 or 25 became 45 or 50 and went in a natural progress from a Third Secretary to an Ambassador—because it was ordained. That also had changed as society has changed.

I am of the strong opinion that one can learn those things. One can learn to be a manager, one can learn some aspects of being a leader. Obviously some of these elements are inbred or you are born with it, but some leadership skills can be learned. We have not successfully managed to develop a system that enables the man or woman who needs exposure to ways of refining, smoothing personality skills, writing skills, managerial skills, to obtain training at the middle level.

We continue to rely on luck. As it turns out, it is my strong opinion, that the luck of the draw, falls on the side of those who perhaps already have certain advantages when it comes either to gender, ethnic background, etc.

I think if you attempt to approach the subject of training as something specifically for white women or women generally, or for African Americans or Hispanics, it is bound to fail because it is going to have some kind of special pleading or special connotation to it.

What I am saying relates to an even broader attitude on my part in which I was also unsuccessful, which is that training is what occurs at the work place. Our Service is one that operates in terms of productivity. There is a cable to get out. There are all kinds of things that have to be done yesterday. The person who is in a fast moving situation like that often says with reason that he doesn't have time to train someone to write, or there isn't time to smooth out the way in which a subordinate operates or handles others.

Well, I am sure that is true in a fair number of jobs in the State Department and abroad, but it is not true of every job. I think there are people who do not face up to their training responsibilities and especially the extra effort that it requires to correct somebody's work from the writing point of view. Or, perhaps, to say to somebody that his or her style is just not conducive to winning friends and influencing people. It is my strong opinion that many of these people who have problems are not helped to overcome their problems.

I think that we lose people that we need not lose and this is without regard to affirmative action or other aspects.

Q: Were you running into opposition or was it just sort of everybody would nod their heads and...

PALMER: It is a culture of inertia. The culture holds that things that have been done in the past ought to be good enough. Everybody is busy and I understand. Except that I really take the view that the most successful officers that I have seen have also been the ones who have almost a kind of innate teaching vocation. They may not always have laid their hands on you in some sort of salvation inducing manner, but they had the ability to impart their learning, their experience.

I am a product probably of Marshall Green, Jack Lydman and Jim Wilson. These were all officers in the Bureau of East Asian Affairs. When I say I am a product, early in my first job Marshall Green heard that I had a certain amount of sense on the particular issue of dealing with Laos. He had me come and talk to him. He took me along to a meeting in the Pentagon where I did my piece and had the feedback of knowing and realizing that I had performed successfully. When I went into the East Asian Bureau as No. 2 on the Philippine Desk I can't tell what Marshall Green did for me specifically when he was Assistant Secretary. All I know is that he seemed reasonably satisfied. He never told me much about whether I was good, bad or indifferent. He called me several times a week to brief him. I presume I stayed there because I was doing a good job. There are all kinds of ways of teaching. I was anxious to please Marshall. I think I did.

Let me mention Jack Lydman in Jakarta. Jack and I fought because I was a headstrong, probably somewhat arrogant kid, not unlike many other head strong arrogant kids. It is just the nature of the beast. When you are young you are like that. Lydman despaired of me. He thought I might fail but Jack and I would work over my drafts. I was supposed to send him the draft before it was to be sent out as a cable or an airgram. I had normal writing problems for a young officer but I was productive, even if cocky. One fine day after I was getting my drafts back with very few changes I decided unilaterally I was going to put them in final form before sending them to him. I did and they went out. Every now and then something would come back, but he never said a word about the fact that, without being told, I had made up my own mind to make final drafts before submission. Well, that was a teaching experience.

Q: What about problems with influences on personnel from outside? This was a period of time when you must have been getting pressure from the African-American community, Hispanic community, women and husband and wife teams in the Foreign Service.

PALMER: There certainly was pressure from the outside. I would say, by and large, that pressure was both episodic, unfocused, and not really very effective. The greatest

pressure came from inside, and that was pressure coming directly from Secretary Vance. He took an ongoing interest in what was happening on the front of equal employment opportunity, and on how we were doing with regard to recruiting minorities and women. He put that pressure directly on Ben Read. If you read Vance's book on his experiences as Secretary of State, one of the things that he is most proud of is what he tried to do with regard to promoting affirmative action.

So, we reached out. On at least two occasions, we brought in a community of black leadership from all across the country, from California, Arizona, Florida, all over the country. We attempted to inform people as to what was going on. We had an ongoing relationship with the Hispanic leadership groups whom we also met. We met the Presidents of the historically black colleges and universities and set up meetings with the Secretary, with Ben Read, etc. to tell them what we were doing and also get feedback from them.

The Presidents of the historically black colleges and universities have maintained since the time of Dean Rusk that what was needed was really an institutional change because by and large these black colleges and universities are small and tended to have less well-developed history, economics, and Political science departments. They saw a need for institutional help. I think that is coming full circle. The Bush Administration is trying to provide Title VI help in the amendments to the Higher Education Act of 1963 to provide help to the international training and teaching effort.

On the African-American front the big problem there at the time was to somehow get the word out through better recruiting methods, that blacks were welcome. I trust it has changed somewhat, but the traditional attitude in the minority community, and that includes Hispanics, Asian-Americans and all minorities, is that the Department and the Foreign Service were preserves for white Anglo-Saxon, Protestant males from the East who had mainly gone to Harvard, Princeton, Yale, etc. Minorities felt they really were not

welcome. Now that may have been an overdrawn perception, but there was surely a lot of truth in it.

Q: It is not too hard to look at who lands things for a long time in the Foreign Service.

PALMER: That's right. Looking back at that time, if you look at the numbers of people actually brought in, we managed to do a pretty vigorous job of it.

Affirmative action was a tremendous effort on the part of the Office of Recruitment (REE). After Carter left and the Reagan Administration came, I think there was, for political, perhaps psychological reasons, but also reasons that I think are also natural after a great deal of energy is put into something, a certain slump. I think through the Reagan Administration there was not the attention or the follow-up to these matters as there had been in the Carter Administration. I suspect and hope certainly with regard to the Hispanic community and to the Asian American and African American communities, that we made an impact back then...and I think the resonances continue.

Q: From a practical point of view you don't want to overdue this. You want to prime the pump but then the normal competitive recruitment system should be working.

PALMER: I think that is the ideal. I think you have to be watching the whole thing pretty carefully though. I am pleased there is a significant increase in confidence, perhaps self-esteem on the part of the Hispanic and Asian American communities in the Foreign Service. I am not sure that that kind of confidence and esteem with regard to the Foreign Service exists in the same way in the African American community. I don't know. Blacks were very discouraged in the Reagan-Bush period. By the same token I was recently at Howard University, in fact last Friday, and I ran across two or three kids who just as a matter of course told me they were taking the examination.

I want to point out firmly that this generalization that the culture of the Department of State is not one that is accommodating or receptive to African Americans continues to exist.

Continuing work is going to be necessary to draw African Americans toward the Foreign Service.

My own sense of things from what I know is that for ill or for good, the proportion of blacks, Hispanics, women, etc. that “get ahead” in the Foreign Service is probably about the same overall as the proportion of white males given the smaller numbers of these populations. Life is hard, generally, in the Foreign Service. These smaller populations hope to be increased to increase the relative rate of success.

In short, the people who really do manage to fight their way through each of the promotional barriers are a fairly small, pretty hard-nosed, pretty able group. And those who manage to fight their way through the barriers between mid-level ranks and senior ranks again are a pretty small group. It is always going to be like that. We are in the process of trying to instill the culture of success, through having reached the equivalent of colonel in the Foreign Service. I am not sure to what extent that has taken hold because I think the Foreign Service remains one of the most optimistic bureaucracies I have ever seen where every man and woman thinks they have the prospect of getting to the top.

Q: You mentioned one thing in the beginning when we were talking about this that Harry Barnes came in with the idea of instilling more discipline to the Service. Looking at this, I may be wrong, but I can almost draw a line of down turning of discipline starting maybe from the sixties to the present. Today if one goes for an assignment one has the feeling you arrive at the assignment panel with your lawyer at your side and present your case and sue if you don't get it. Obviously I am turning that into a comic turn, but the point being that assignments today are not accepted as readily as they used to be.

PALMER: I think that is an interesting question. One of my functions was to be the bad guy. I was the bad cop if someone was giving the personnel panel difficulty. I was always a nice guy, they always had an opportunity to appeal the assignment, but when they got to me I was the guy who said no. Obviously I wasn't so inflexible that if there really was a

case to made I would not listen, but typically by the time a case did come up to me I felt pretty sure that the person involved had had a good hearing.

Now one of the things that we did do was to begin changing the eight year rule. Remember it used to be that you could stay in Washington for eight years. We changed that to five years. I know that people still manage to dance around that, but it is a problem of reality. I think people tend to think that prior to 1956 and the Wristonization of the State Department when the Foreign Service and the Civil Service were melded, that there was distinctly a Departmental Service where people could have a long and happy career working in the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs for ever, if they wished. And there was a Foreign Service where people essentially stayed overseas for reasons that had to do with the fact that that was the way it was.

Interestingly enough, I think the Foreign Service people enjoyed having a domestic tour from time to time but really felt themselves to be more overseas oriented. I am not really sure what the attitude of the people who are more domestically oriented, but I had the sense that for them a tour abroad was more of an exception than the rule. So we have tried to meld two groups, one which is comfortable being overseas with everything that means, and another group which for all types of complicated reasons, and traditional reasons having to do with family, do not have a high motivation for living overseas.

In some respects I think that we need to recognize that we do have a certain population within the Foreign Service of folks who view an overseas assignment as a break in an essentially stateside or domestic career. To move that point a little further, one of the realities about a couple working is the difficulty of assigning them together to a post where each has a fulfilling job.

Q: Tandem couples. Both persons professional foreign service trying to get assignments to the same post.

PALMER: That is right. I am all for people being married. In fact I don't really have a problem with people having emotional relationships at posts. It is my hope that they won't scare the horses. But with regard to people being married, typically that means that the post has to be large enough so that you can accommodate both husband and wife which means that they have to be separated enough both in terms of hierarchical rank and also in terms of geography because of the evaluation system. Consequently you are talking about Paris, Rome, London, Tokyo...the big, and often desirable, posts where, if you permit it, a significant number of the jobs could be encumbered by people who are husband and wife. What that means, however, is that for the person who is slaving away in Africa, or the Near East, or some place like that, who might wish to go to London or Madrid, such a person can be disadvantaged in terms of competing against what is clearly a good thing, a couple being together.

There are a number of aspects of modern life that represent a problem in terms of trying to run an organization like the Foreign Service. Another element of reality is the fact that parents want to be able to take a handicapped child with them when they go somewhere, and they want facilities like schools which can accommodate such children to be available. Such facilities are not present in many places in the world. To put it another way, they are rarely present in the world period, outside a certain number of states in Europe and the United States.

All these elements which are now a part of the work place are things that we in the Foreign Service have to deal with and contemplate. The application of “bloody minded,” or “iron discipline” just can't cope with all these real problems. Yet our system of evaluation, promotion, etc. to some extent is based on almost the kind of elect of the predestined who can cope somehow being apart from their sick mother, who is back in South Dakota or their working wife. Supposedly they can do whatever is necessary to get the job done notwithstanding the human problems that others face. I am not really sure that that is fair. I think there are some very complicated questions.

Q: I know exactly what you mean. Well, Ron I have kept you a long time on this, shall we move along to Malaysia?

PALMER: Yes. How did Palmer get to Malaysia? Among other things I was in Personnel. Harry Barnes had been relieved by Haig and company when they came to State. Joan Clark was the Director General-designate but didn't come for a while so I was the Acting Director General for a while. It was my responsibility to help the new group, the Reagan Administration group, find their way around and help them get staffed, etc. I did that to their satisfaction. Barbara Watson was the Ambassador in Malaysia and the time came to replace her. She had been there a relatively short time. Given the fact that I had done a good job in Personnel, the fact that I was black in addition to the fact that I spoke Malay and the fact that I had a considerable background in Southeast Asia, all came together in a way I had not anticipated.

When the list of potentials for the post was sent, at that time to Richard Kennedy, the Under Secretary of Management, my name was on the list. Boom, I was selected.

I went out in 1981 to Kuala Lumpur for the second time and had a delightful and very, very useful assignment.

Q: Before we end this interview I would like to ask how you found the changeover of administrations...between the Carter Administration and the Reagan one? Strictly from your vantage point. You are dealing with personnel and really in charge of it. Was this a "hostile" takeover?

PALMER: I will be very frank with you. I doubt that I was in a minority of those who were willing to be forthcoming or helpful to Haig and company. But the attitude towards the Reagan people coming in on the part of some of the Carter Administration officials, including some who were Foreign Service officers, was not positive. You have probably heard this before.

Candidly, I took the view that they had won the election and as far as I knew the Constitution they were entitled to anything in the house that was there to be had. Which meant there were personnel files. In the first instance we tried, because the files are large, etc., to give a gloss on the files, that is to do a brief on the people in whom they were interested. In time it became clear to me, at least, that we needed to do a thorough job as to what the person's assignments were, the background...no different for the Reagan Administration than we had done for the Carter Administration. That was my attitude and the way I operated.

I found that the attitudes of Secretary Haig, Woody Goldberg, who worked for him as his Special Assistant, certainly Secretary Kennedy, and the others with whom I had any dealing with, were all very gentlemanly. Richard Kennedy is well known to have an explosive temper and temperament. I am sure I must have tried him on occasion, but the only time he ever got angry at me I decided the only way to cope was that as his voice went up the decibel level I just let mine go up as well and eventually the thing was so silly that he started laughing. Maybe it is that I have a good personality for that sort of thing.

But Personnel operated as a staff function. We did what the new folks wanted. It was not a “hostile” takeover as far as I was concerned.

Q: Well, thank you very much.

Well here we go again. Today is June 13, 1991 and this is a continuing interview with Ambassador Ronald D. Palmer. Ron last time we had just gotten to 1981 and you had left Personnel. You were appointed as Ambassador to Malaysia at that time. How did that appointment come about?

PALMER: When the Reagan Administration came to town, the transition group was seated at the State Department. I was roaming all over the building talking to folks as part of my job. When I heard the transition group was installed, I went around to see who they were.

They included Ambassador Robert Neumann, who went on to become Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and the man who became the Under Secretary for Management whose name is Richard Kennedy.

A very strange circumstance at the time was that the feelings on the part of the outgoing Carter people were so bitter against the newcomers. So there got to be some nonsense. The Carter people were suggesting that not complete personnel records be turned over to the incoming folks. I couldn't quite understand what the rationale for that was until I realized that the concern about the character of the incoming people was so high that some people felt they just couldn't trust them. I couldn't stand for that. I was the one in Personnel with the responsibility for this kind of exchange. Harry Barnes had been fired. So basically I was Acting Assistant Secretary. Joan Clark came along as the incoming Director General, but not really having control of the system and how things were to be done she relied on me.

Perhaps the most basic reason is that when I was teaching at West Point back in 1967-69, I used to take PT at noon. I was on the basketball team of the Social Sciences Department playing “murder ball.” I would be taking my shower about the same time as the Deputy Commandant of Cadets was taking his after his exercise. We used to chat. That guy's name was Al Haig. So when Haig came down I was one of the few people that he knew and I was trusted.

Richard Kennedy, is without a doubt one of the most difficult and stormy characters I have ever met. But in contrast to many people whom he could bully...and he was thoroughly capable of bullying...for some reason he couldn't bully me. It was just that I found the whole thing funny. So when he would start raising his voice, I would start laughing. As a consequences in some strange way we had rapport.

One fine day Malaysia was on the group of posts that needed to be filled and we sent up perfectly good candidates. I was on the list but just there because I had had Malaysia

experience. Bless my soul, when the thing came back, I think Joan Clark had gone to the meeting, I was the one who had been selected. I think it had a lot to do with the circumstances of being a steady person in a changing transitional situation.

Q: When you went out there what did you see and those you talked to see as American interests in Malaysia in this 1981-83 period?

PALMER: I had very strong feeling about the place of Southeast Asia generally in American policy. I didn't really feel the region was getting the attention that it deserved and specifically I had very strong feelings about Malaysia and its potential to be a better partner of the United States if the US and Malaysia could find a way of developing that relationship.

The difficulty on the American side is the continuing difficulty we have with many, many states. While we may be a very large star in their sky, they are often barely visible in our own sky. This was resented by the Malaysians. I was sensitive to that but there wasn't very much I could do about it. Candidly, I felt the Malaysians were somewhat complacent, somewhat self-satisfied, rather as if Malaysia was the center of the world. So I had my problems from that direction.

Having said that I felt that my major interest was in trying to demonstrate through the interactions of the two countries that the United States, 250 million people, and Malaysia with perhaps 15 million people could have an effective relationship notwithstanding their differences in size. What it meant was that both sides would have to take each other seriously. That was where I spent a good deal of my time trying to have them understand us and us understand them.

We had a range of issues. Perhaps refugees was one of the most poignant and difficult. On refugees I have to say that Malaysia was then and has continued to be very helpful and very supportive.

Q: Explain what the refugee problem was.

PALMER: If you look at a map you will observe that Vietnam is not quite due north of Malaysia but is north. The water currents are such that if you launch a boat, and get out into the ocean and just point south basically you will run into Malaysia. This was what a large number of people from Vietnam had done starting from the fall of Saigon in 1975...so-called boat people. In the beginning a lot of them were Chinese and that represented a very special problem in Malaysia given the ethnic makeup of the state which is Malay and Chinese. These people drifted into the Malaysian State of Terengganu and there an island, Pulau Bisot, which had been made into a refugee camp. There were great problems in terms of coping with feeding these people, supplying security, etc.

In this context, the Malaysians particularly, but at that time period, the Singaporeans and Indonesians as well as the Thai, in terms of overland refugees, depended upon American and Australian and European guarantees to take the refugees out of the camps. In the case of the first asylum countries of which Malaysia was one, there was never a notion that these people would stay there permanently. They obviously could not sustain these types of ethnic infusions and the idea was that the refugees would go on some place else.

So, there was a constant sort of tension over the case loads...the number of refugees on the one hand and the number of persons that were being taken off to go elsewhere on the other hand.

But I thought, and I still think, that the Malaysians handled that pretty well. There was a large humanitarian aspect to it. There was also a very, very complicated domestic political problem about it as well.

I will speak later on about Prime Minister Mohamed Mahathir because he got the world's attention when all this started back in 1975 when he was Deputy Prime Minister by basically saying that Malaysia was going to shoot these refugees as they came ashore

because they were simply illegal immigrants. That powerfully focused the minds of those involved in refugee issues.

Typically in those days there would be somewhere around 20,000 refugees in a camp. In certain seasons when the winds would change, and depending on circumstances of what was happening back in Vietnam, you could get very large numbers of people just sort of floating in. They used the lights from the flares from the offshore oil wells to guide them.

Q: The Malaysians wanted to get them out and we were putting a lot of pressure on the Malaysians not to cast them out, did you find yourself betwixt and between?

PALMER: I must say that I had a certain kind of attitude towards my mission or even about myself. It was that the only way I could work with the Malaysians successfully was if they trusted me. Of course, I had the same attitude with regard to my colleagues in the American government. They could trust me as well to do as well as I could in terms of pursuing the American agenda, as long as I felt the Malaysian interests were also being adequately looked at.

Much had to do with the setting of reasonable targets of off-take of refugees. When I say reasonable I mean that our targets had to be sufficiently large and realistic that the Malaysians would accept that this was our best effort, that we were doing the most we could. They were reasonable. However, they knew that if we wished to we could take all these folks in. In their mind whether or not we did so had to do as much with political will as it did with other types of persuasions.

In any event, we periodically had visits from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees out of Geneva and members of his staff who were located in Bangkok. As far as I am concerned our Embassy always approached these matters with as much candor, earnestness, and sincerity as we possibly could. That was true also in terms of our

dealings with the Malaysian government and also in our dealings with the American government.

So, it worked. This comes back to the notion of how I pursued the mission. I think I am describing to you a kind of pro-active approach which doesn't mean that I was ringing the Tocsin at every point either in terms of American relations with the State Department or with Malaysia, but it did mean that I was not afraid to call a spade a spade when I thought the case needed it.

The next issue I want to raise is narcotics. Here the Malaysians were outstanding. We at that time had three DEA agents in the country and the Malaysians were very cooperative in terms of operations we would run in Penang. Malaysia in those days was a transit country in terms of heroin coming out from Thailand and then going on to Europe, etc. Unfortunately, people who move a product within a country tend to get paid in the product whatever it may be. So with heroin falling off the truck, so to speak, it did become somewhat dispersed in the Malaysia and therefore became a very, very frightening problem for the Malaysian government.

At the time that I was there, 1981-83, there was relatively little processing equipment in the country. That has changed somewhat. A certain amount of processing facilities have developed in the area where the Malaysian Communist Party was operating. I will come back to that somewhat later.

The point is that through the time I was in Malaysia the number of local Malaysian heroin addicts ranged from something like 120,000 as a bottom, conservative figure to a high figure of as many as 400,000. This was a very frightening problem.

Q: Those proportions are quite high for a small country.

PALMER: Exactly.

Q: Particularly an Asian country that hasn't normally reached those proportions.

PALMER: There were several aspects to this, all of which were very troubling to everyone. We were always trying to find ways of dealing and coping and we are still doing so. Malaysia, after all, was a country going through tremendously upsetting, destabilizing kind of changes of all types: socially, politically, psychologically. These changes have their impact. I would say that Malaysia in many ways is the prototypical country of the “paper chase” in terms of getting academic documentation. If you don't pass what used to be called the 11plus examination you are shunted into less than higher level of academic pursuits and preparations. God forbid if you don't pass the lower certificate examination in the first half of secondary school at about the age of 15/16. You do not have a chance to go on to higher levels of secondary schools which would take a child up to about 18/19 years of age and which would enable you to go directly into medical school, and the whole schooling kind of system that the British installed.

Q: I am interrupting here, because I want to focus more on what you did as the American ambassador. You have been a schoolteacher too long, you are explaining Malaysia well, but lets focus on what you did.

PALMER: Then I have to say that where all I said before comes out is that you have people who return to the villages and sometimes you have a drug being dispensed in the villages. It is hard to imagine anything worse than that.

So we brought in experts in terms of dealing with narcotic issues from places like Daytop, which is in New York. This was a rugged, harshly, disciplined sort of approach. We did a lot in the way of teaching training programs. We worked very closely with the police, with the educational authorities and also with political authorities.

One of the things that I spent a lot of my time on then was commodity issues. Malaysia has been one of the world's largest producer of tin, rubber, cacao, and palm oil. The

early 1980s was a period in which there was a down turn in commodity prices. One of the particular problems which manifested was in tin. The United States has had a stockpile of strategic materials since World War II and I don't know what it consists of today. But typically it consisted of everything from feathers to minerals, including tin. I am not able to remember how many tons of tin the United States has in its stockpile. But our stockpile has tin in vast amounts, hundreds of thousands of tons, and so periodically the United States releases tin from its stockpile in an attempt to realize a certain amount of return and for other reasons that have to do with simply trying to move materials through the stockpile. Although we were sometimes moving tin in dimensions of 12 or 13 thousand tons a year, we were not acting like a producer, although the levels of tin we were releasing came close to the levels that some of the actual tin producers were putting on the market. To the producers we appeared occasionally to act as if we were not trying to get the best price we could. We seemed to be acting without regard to market conditions to many people interested in tin. This is an issue that has been going on since about 1962.

Tin was not the only commodity problem. There was also rubber. We went through a long problem with rubber and I really don't know how the rubber stockpile issue came out. In contrast to rubber, of course, aged and had to be released or thrown away. I think when tires were changed in the United States so that instead of using synthetic rubber the new radial tires needed a certain amount of natural rubber that gave a boost to natural rubber use. This synergistic result seems to have helped the rubber stockpile problem to be susceptible to a net resolution.

In any event the stockpile issue was a terrible problem in bilateral relations and had been for many years. It made the United States appear like a bully, like we really didn't care what happened. It was a strange situation.

Many of the smaller producing mines were ones that were working over territory that had already been used. These US tin releases tended to reduce the price of tin and

made some of the Chinese labor-intensive operations uneconomic. This caused Chinese entrepreneurs to put political pressure on the Government.

This added to existing Malay-Chinese problems. These US tin releases were typically Chinese and very labor intensive. The Malay-Chinese issue was a sensitive problem, as you know.

The tin issue became inflamed in bilateral relations in 1982. One of the strangest things that started happening was that there was a mystery buyer who came into the market. This mystery buyer started driving the price of tin up. In this context the American in GSA, the stockpile manager, and the mystery buyer were sort of vying with each other. One day I sent a long message into the State Department going over the heads of the regional bureau. At that time John Holdridge was the Assistant Secretary and I simply was not getting satisfaction in terms of what I thought the issue needed in terms of attention.

So Larry Eagleburger was at that time the Under Secretary for Political Affairs, and Larry has always been one of my supporters, gurus. He was involved in my selection to my first ambassadorship in the mid-seventies. So I sent a message For Eagleburger: From Palmer, describing what was happening. We were creating enemies and a situation that was simply untenable.

Apparently Eagleburger bounced the thing back to Holdridge and company, which did not make John my friend to say the least. John sent me a very vigorous telegram criticizing my cable to Eagleburger. Eventually, I also got a somewhat less than wonderful evaluation of my performance from him. It was good but not wonderful. I paid the price. That's life.

In due course, I was called on the telephone one day to come see the Prime Minister. Prime Minister Mahathir tried to give me holy hell. I wouldn't take it because there was no reason to give me holy hell. I said whatever was happening on the market, was the result of the US selling in the market, but it was also the result of the mystery buyer. There was something happening in the market that was unusual and it looked as if someone was

attempting to corner the market and drive the price up. I had my suspicions that it was the Malaysians. Until then I had always had pleasant relations with Prime Minister Mahathir who was a very, very rugged character. The meeting was unpleasant but it was a standoff.

I went back to my office whereupon the Prime Minister called to tell me that he was going to have a friend of his get in touch with me to explain the Malaysian situation in greater detail. I wondered who could do that better than the Prime Minister. It turned out that this friend was a man who was a Malaysian Senator at the time. His name was Daim Zainuddin. Daim was a business partner of the Prime Minister. He was happy just doing business but he had become a politician—reluctantly. He had been involved in land development and housing. Daim called me and asked if I could come around to his house where he and some friends could talk to me about some of these issues and problems. I agreed.

I went to his house and met him. I had never seen him before. He was sharp and intense. I knew quickly he had a first-class mind. As I entered the house, I saw there were about ten people seated there. I noticed there was an embassy officer with his Chinese girl friend. Diam's wife said, “Tonight we are not going to act like Malays. We are not going to be indirect. Tonight we are going to tell you exactly what is on our minds.”

They proceeded to do so, the ten or so of them with me in the bull ring. They were all biting and chewing on me. I soon discovered that this had no malevolent intent. They were trying to explain the world from their prospective. It was not just tin. It included the whole range of issues including the lack of investment by America and the fact that the US was not taking Malaysia seriously, in their view. They said Malaysia was exactly the kind of country that the US ought to be trying to help: a country that did good things for it, a country that had self respect; a country that had no intention, ever, of groveling before the United States. We had a really vigorous exchange.

Finally Diam's wife, whose name is Mahani, stopped it and declared time out. She is a wonderful woman. We had a meal. We established a good relationship despite all the debate. It was basically that they were accusing me and the United States of not being able to do things that we really couldn't do and of doing things that we weren't doing. So a large part of my effort was trying to explain my version of reality to them. I don't know whether I was successful but I think they realized I was sincere and was telling the truth.

Q: Were you trying to explain that we didn't feel there was essentially a problem in Malaysia and were more concerned with the Middle East, etc.?

PALMER: I did it a little differently because that approach will make people angry. What I did instead was to try to explain simply in bilateral terms what the US and Malaysia ought to be trying to do with each other. I did make the point that Malaysia had to be realistic. Malaysia was never going to get the type of attention that perhaps larger and more powerful countries would inevitably get. I tried to say that in a way that did not incite my audience. This went on and on and on.

At the end of the evening, I had said everything that I could possibly say and I felt that they had said everything they could say. I was very impressed though that I had met with extraordinary Malays. These were personal friends. This had been a very serious, high level, non-political group of citizens. They were well disposed towards the United States but they were intensely nationalistic, proud of their country and society, and demanding of respect for Malaysia.

Q: There was not an ideological problem?

PALMER: No, no. Fortunately, the young man who had been there from the Embassy came in to see me the next day and I had a chance to review the evening with him. He was in the political section and I asked if he would be able to do a message that would give the flavor of the encounter. He did a good job and sent in a useful cable.

This would have been about March or April, 1983, because in June that year there was the ASEAN Ministerial meeting in Bangkok. After the meeting, Secretary of State Shultz met with all the US ambassadors to ASEAN and we talked back and forth. After that he called each of us in for individual discussions. I had been pretty vigorous in stating my views, as seen from Malaysia. I had disagreed with the Secretary when all the others were generally letting him say whatever he wanted to say. He had been very hard on the Third World generally and I finally made a long speech disagreeing with him. I said whatever he thought was the problem with the Third World was not the case in ASEAN, except for the Philippines which was the American problem. The rest of the countries out there were by and large trying to do things in the way that the US said we wanted and ASEAN ought to be given credit for that.

When he called me in he said, “I never understood the Foreign Service's personnel system.” Therefore, I knew I was going to be relieved and that there was nothing at that point waiting for me in terms of a next assignment. That was okay with me. That is life in the fast lane. The Secretary turned to tin. He said, “What can we do about tin?” I said, “Do you want to do something about tin, Mr. Shultz?” He said, “Yes.” I said, “All we need to do is become predictable.” He asked me to explain.

Q: He was an economist.

PALMER: Yes. So I explained the role of the various producers. I explained the nature of the market, how much was going into the market and what the result was of US tin disposal policy. Do you know, I was the last Ambassador to be received at that time. Then he said I should come with him to the Five Plus One meeting where the five ASEAN Ministers would address the Secretary of State. This was the dialogue session. Shultz took his seat and I sat with the ambassadors. Very quickly into this session, somebody, not the Malaysian, addressed Shultz and essentially said that there was a major problem with the United States in terms of tin. This person said you are cutting our throats. Shultz said that we are going to make a new American policy with regard to the tin issue and

indeed with other commodities issues. We were going to be predictable. They would be able to see what we were doing. Our actions would be transparent. The US had no desire to affect markets. Anything we sold from our stockpile we wanted to go into a market that was strong and steady. We had no desire to depress the market because we would then get less for the goods from our stockpile.

I sat there and said to myself, “Hallelujah!” It wasn't that he read my brief, but he had heard everything that I had said.

So I went back to Kuala Lumpur. Now this is June. Along about August I got a highly classified message, you know, the kind you burn before reading, I think it came from Eagleburger. It said that they had got what I wanted, however, in order to get it they had to roll David Stockman (Director of the Bureau of the Budget at that time and a very powerful figure in the Reagan early years) and seven or eight Cabinet Secretaries. Consequently, the Department told me I had what I wanted but not a word of my instructions could be changed because it would mean having to go through another painful interagency process.

I looked at the instructions and saw that there was room to nudge it around a bit. I called up Senator Daim and told him that I thought we had something to work with. I went to see him and discussed my instructions. He said such and such would have to be changed and I told him no changes were possible. That was the problem. In order to make this work we had to keep the tin issue firmly fixed on the result we wished to achieve and my instructions could achieve that if we could avoid too much legalistic hassling.

He went through the process on his side including briefing the Prime Minister, the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister for Basic Commodities, etc. However, these discussions were difficult. He kept me informed but I had to try to keep up with him. I sent messages back and forth to Washington. Finally Washington agreed to what we had managed to work out and said that they thought we had something that might be put together in a final agreement.

I went to Singapore where Daim was at that point, and we negotiated for a couple of hours and finally decided the way to handle problems was to write a side note, a minute as it were, to the negotiations. So we did so. This was successful with the Malaysian government and the ASEAN Governments. Not long after, Daim told me he was he was going to have to go into Parliament because he was getting leaned on by the politicians. After going into the Parliament he became Minister of Finance. I was fortunate in having him for a friend. Our relationship was established in blood...both having to deal with our own bureaucracies. We have had a very pleasant relationship since then.

One of the things that has happened subsequent to my ambassadorship is that the Malaysians have become much more open to foreign investment and much more open to American investment. I am not going to tie it all to me, far from it, but, eventually, the fact that we were able to get this deal on tin was the consequence of White House involvement. Gaston Sigur, Richard Childress and others who were there at that time had a positive view of Malaysia and helped create a better US-Malaysia bilateral atmosphere. This helped greatly in increasing the interest of US investors in Malaysia.

So here in 1991, clearly Malaysia and the United States are not on the same level of warmth of relationship as many countries, but our relationship is on a higher plane. It is better, more open, then many US relationships and I think we really are doing quite well. Many aspects of the relationship have become much more open and helpful to both sides.

One should not forget that there is a defense context to this relationship. One consequence of working, as it were, on tin and getting something together there, was that one day I was in seeing the Prime Minister with the Commander of the Seventh Fleet. Malaysia and the rest of the ASEAN countries have very solid relations with CINCPAC whose headquarters is in Honolulu. CINCPAC has people working in all the phases of political-military affairs and they are outstanding officers in my opinion.

They visit the ASEAN countries periodically and have had a positive influence. Among other things they sometimes take part in helping to set up exercises. One of the points of military exercises is to exercise communication, intelligence and all those functions that need to be good if there is a military requirement. You may have noticed that General Schwarzkopf testified yesterday, June 12, about his concerns about the battle field intelligence.

Q: We are talking about the Persian Gulf War against Iraq.

PALMER: So CINCPAC officers and local military officers hold what are called CPXs, Command Post Exercises. We were doing, and continue doing very nice exercises with Malaysia, Indonesia, etc. So with the Commander of the Seventh Fleet present, I said to the Prime Minister, “Have you ever been on a carrier?” He said, “No.” I said, “How would you like to go?” He said that he would like to. Then and there, I was within a month of departing the country, September, 1983, we started the ball going so that the Prime Minister of Malaysia did go and spend an afternoon on the “Carl Vinson,” which is a very first class modern carrier. He had lunch, a tour and watched launching of aircraft, etc.

It was a funny situation in many ways because the Malaysian Foreign Ministry did not want the Prime Minister to do it, but he did. Finally it was agreed that there was to be no publicity about the visit. That was no problem. There must have been ten or more on the Malaysian side and we had a great time. The Navy took us on board in what are called COD aircraft, (carrier-on-deck) aircraft. They looked perfectly innocuous when you see them on the ground, but I began to have concern when I could see that we were being strapped in. I was told we would be landing on the carrier and stopped by use of arresting hooks. If you haven't landed on a carrier and been stopped by the arresting hook it is a very jolting experience.

Then we proceeded to have a good visit. As it became time to leave the Prime Minister looked at me and said, “Surely even the Americans would not be crazy enough to send the

Malaysian Prime Minister off an aircraft carrier in a catapulted airplane." I said, "Yes they would." We all laughed; sure enough we all got into that aircraft again and were catapulted off.

The point of all that is that it is possible to have very useful, man-to-man, serious relations with foreign leaders. You don't always try to get everything that you can, you are lucky to get even part of what you want. But there is something very important about getting person-to-person, I don't think it has to be a man necessarily, a woman can be just as effective, but to get relations of confidence going with the foreign leader.

I make the point about this to say that there were several things that advanced the ball during my time there in the country. I hope I am not egotistical in saying this, but I think there has been a long term effect because prior to my being there most Malays had been very distant from Americans. I don't know how people have done after me, but certainly my embassy had good relations with the Malay community, including the nobility. The Americans have always had good relations with the Chinese and that continued during my period. I think we also had pretty good relations with the Indian community. The embassy was well thought of by all three communities, as well as the diplomatic, and expatriate community, including the expatriate Americans.

We had access. We established a kind of a frame of reference in which ongoing plans and attitudes with regard to using the American educational system for higher education developed even more. We had a great USIS headed by Paul Blackburn. I think somehow because we had a good Embassy, we had good rapport. I think this encouraged the Malaysians to get into the mode of thinking of the US as a good place to send students. A pattern was started that eventually led to something around 25,000 students studying in the United States. They came at the freshman level and stayed for four or more years. I don't want to attach that unduly to our embassy's effectiveness but I do believe that the United States was seen increasingly as another possibility for Malaysians.

It started with Malaysians purchasing property and as they did they discovered that there was a lively life and culture in the United States. They discovered the variety of the United States: that there was different types of weather in the United States. I don't say that to make fun of them. Previously, their experience had been in England. Once they started to make more discoveries about the United States they realized property could be purchased at good prices in many places in the United States. Obviously, many of these same people had children and the youngsters started going to college and university in the States and there has developed a kind of warmth to the relationships over the years. I think this has been really important for both sides.

Now, candidly, I think the United States has got a problem in terms of looking at the Malaysian situation in that Prime Minister Mahathir, having come to power in 1981 and still being in power in 1991, and is likely to be in power for some while to come. He is becoming one of the more senior political figures in Asia. He, himself, is developing a certain third world leadership following and I think it is in our advantage to understand that even though Malaysia is a small country, it does carry a certain weight and authority with the world out there because they have been successful. They have had 8 or 9 percent growth regularly. Malaysia and Prime Minister Mahathir believe they do not get adequate respect from the United States Government.

The point I would simply make is that I think my embassy carried on with something that others had developed in earlier years before us and has been developed since we were there. Basically I saw my mission as continuing the effort to put relations between the United States and Malaysia on an upward curve. They are still on that curve.

Q: You said that you had sort of ruffled feathers back in the Department of State by trying to draw attention to Malaysia. How did that affect your next assignment? You said you left in 1983.

PALMER: First let me say that when I left Malaysia, I had an accolade that very few people have received from the Malaysian Prime Minister. In his gruff way, he stopped one day as we were both at some affair and looked at me very directly and said, “Ambassador Palmer you have done a good job here.” Of course I almost had a heart attack.

When I got back to Washington there were several realities. Haig and company had gone, including Under Secretary Kennedy. There was a new situation. I was also coming toward the end of the first Reagan term. This was the time for rewarding the Party faithful. So the number of assignments available for career officers was limited. Very candidly, in the real world of the East Asian Bureau, I had had a post that in the East Asian Bureau is as close to getting heaven you could possibly get. Since I was already among the anointed, there was nothing more that the Bureau either could do or would do. That may not be the best way to say it but that was the reality. The East Asian Bureau is one of the best so there are always able people coming up.

I understood that. I knew that I had to stand in line for my next post. I also knew that I was a good officer and that my time would come again. As it happened I had visited CSIS (Center for Strategic and International Studies) on one of my home leave visits. It had a direct relationship with Georgetown University which provided administrative services. Dr. Amos A. Jordan, Joe Jordan, who had been my Department Chairman at West Point was then the President of CSIS and his deputy was Colonel William Taylor who had also been at West Point. Reginald Brown, also from West Point days, was there working as an economist. Reggie is now number three in the AID Agency, by the way. Reg asked me what I was going to do next and I told him that I didn't know. Without my knowledge he told Jordan that I was coming back, and to the best of his knowledge, was not assigned. Jordan sent a letter over to the State saying that he understood that Ron Palmer was coming back and he would like to have him. So that was my assignment, I went to CSIS as a Diplomat-in-Residence. From their point of view I was a Visiting Scholar.

I was the senior person working on Southeast Asia and was the backup for Helen Kitchen who was the African expert there. I followed political/military affairs as well. I plunged in and made myself as useful as possible.

In the summer of 1984 there clearly was no new assignment possible. It just wasn't on, simply because of reality. It was just too soon.

The summer of 1985, however, I was told that I was a candidate for a couple of missions. Things were easing up a little bit more because the elections took place in 1984. In the meantime, I had proceeded to do a job, to make myself useful. You may recall that the Philippines got to be very much on people's minds.

Q: The overthrow of Marcos.

PALMER: And the death of Aquino, etc. So I became one of the Washington sources on the Philippines. My very strange think-tank position was that my name not be used because I was on active duty. Therefore, I was the cheapest date in town. Anybody could call and I could give them a long disquisition on the Philippine situation but I couldn't be identified. It was okay with me.

Despite my active duty status, however, I started doing some writing at CSIS. I wrote a number of things on the Philippines. I think I was probably the first person in Washington to state publicly that Marcos would probably have to go. I cleared these writings with the State Department. The arrangement I had with the Senior Deputy Assistant Secretary, John Monjo, was that I would deliver my papers to him and if he had any problems he would let me know. If there weren't any problems I could publish. As I indicated, I was the first person in town in the think tank circuit to really, more in sadness than anger, say that Marcos really had to go. My name started getting around and I became known to the White House, to some of the people over there who read the work I was doing in CSIS.

Of course I was occasionally involved in some of the things that were being done by CSIS with the Congress and with the Executive Office.

As far as I know my status going into 1985-86, was as someone who had “stood in line” but was also developing some reputation in the think tank world. I became a candidate for several posts. Initially at the end of 1985 I was the Department's candidate for Ivory Coast. Ivory Coast didn't work out. Then in the spring of 1986 I was a candidate for Kenya. That went to the Secretary's office but didn't work out because Elinor Constable had to be accommodated because she had really done yeoman work. She had been Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Economic/Commercial Affairs Bureau at a very difficult time. She was an economist and an excellent officer. I was pleased she was selected.

Along the way I was told that I would be a candidate for Barbados if all else failed. I was not thrilled knowing nothing about Barbados, but who was I to say no. So the day came along in May or June when the meeting took place at the White House to select a slate of ambassadors.Unfortunately, the President had already promised Barbados to a member of the Party faithful. What else was there? The answer to that question was Mauritius. I was called urgently by Under Secretary for Management Ron Spiers and asked to say then and there whether I would go to Mauritius. I said, “Mauritius?” And he said, “Don't ask, this is how it came out. What is your answer?” I asked for a moment to gather my mind. I think he let me call him back in five minutes or so.

I sat there and said to myself that I was a professional officer. I didn't know a thing about Mauritius but if this is what the powers that be wanted I would accept my responsibility and do the best job I could. I would salute and do the job. So I called Spiers back. He said, “Fine, because if you hadn't said yes the White House was going to take it back and we need every ambassadorship we can get. You have done your duty and besides you will find Mauritius is going to be a surprise. You will enjoy it.”

And that was how I was assigned to Mauritius.

Q: This is January 31, 1992 and we are continuing an interview with Ambassador Ronald D. Palmer. You went to Mauritius from 1986-89. What did you see as our American interests in that area?

PALMER: There was, of course, a major security interest as a consequence of the fact that we were the lessees of the great American base at Diego Garcia.

Q: How far is Diego Garcia from Mauritius?

PALMER: It is about six hours flying, as I recall. It is in a different time zone and closer to India.

Q: So it isn't next door. Would you explain the administrative relationship of Mauritius and Diego Garcia?

PALMER: I would be happy to. As I recall, there was a governor general in the British colonial system that was responsible for Mauritius. In that colonial period Mauritius included islands that were in a particular geographical area, spread over a considerable expanse of ocean. This was also the case of Seychelles which is north and west of Mauritius and included a number of islands spread in the sea. The island of Diego Garcia was administered by the governor general who was responsible for Mauritius.

However, in the 1960s as independence approached in Mauritius, there were discussions between the United States and the United Kingdom governments (I am sure this is documented somewhere) which resulted in a decision on the part of the British government to retain Diego Garcia and several other small islands which were called the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). As I recall, it was in the early seventies, perhaps the late sixties, that the United States had some sort of radio station on Diego Garcia. It was the Pakistan/India conflict and the Yom Kippur War (October, 1973) that made it became apparent that the BIOT territory was a strategically located place.

Since 1973 the United States has made a considerable investment, transforming Diego Garcia, with the consent of the British, into a major supply facility. The US has also improved the harbor and port areas, as well as constructing two very large and extensive runways with parking aprons large enough to take large bombers.

Q: How big?

PALMER: B-52s. As I recall there were two major runways. One was B-52 capable which meant it had to be quite wide because of the wing expanse of the aircraft, and the other that would be capable of taking the C-141 which is called the Star-Lifter.

I want to underline that these things were done with the consent of the British government. The BIOT remained a British territory and whatever we did on the island was done under the authority or guidance of the British authority. So there has been for some time an annual meeting between the American authorities and the British authorities having to do with what was going on in Diego Garcia.

The point of all of this is that Diego Garcia became a major interest of the United States. The Mauritian government understandably had a certain amount of irritation over this US-British relationship. However, Mauritius took it with relatively good grace. Some people in Mauritius even considered it to have been perhaps the cost of independence. It was one of those things that happened back there at that time in the 1960s as events were approaching independence in 1968.

Therefore my Embassy had no administrative responsibility for the island. We did, however, watch and study carefully comments and attitudes as they developed in Mauritius towards Diego Garcia.

However, the most important concerns of the United States regarding this small island and small population, were, in fact, rather large and symbolic. We had an important political interest in Mauritius largely because it was a successful democracy. It was a successful

parliamentary democracy on the model of the British Westminster system. You recall the mid-eighties was a time when democracy was starting to make a comeback in the world. Remember many of the post-colonial governments had been initially democracies and then gone through various types of changes resulting in one party states.

So the United States was generally interested in being supportive of the Mauritius political system which had gone through elections, changes of government, and was a good example of democracy.

On the economic side, we wanted to demonstrate through our AID program some of the virtues of deregulation and helping governments move away from tightly controlled economies and towards free market economies. Thus Mauritius, which had quite a viable private sector, was chosen as one of five governments by AID as models of political and economic systems. In fact there was cooperation with the World Bank. We tried to coordinate our programs and the Bank's programs. The other countries, as I recall, were Senegal, Botswana...I don't recall the other two.

What this meant was that the Mauritius Government was progressively reducing its tariffs, cutting down generally on regulations and trying to move the economy to a more and more open basis.

It happened that Mauritius in the 1970s made a considerable windfall profit as a consequence of the increase in commodity prices. You may recall back in the early 1970s all commodities boomed and Mauritius sugar also boomed when the price went up. Mauritius produces a high quality of sugar. About 650,000 tons are produced.

When the boom came, the government led by one of the great men of this century, Prime Minister Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam, provided great leadership He was a Hindu in a country that was 51 percent Hindu, but with 17 percent Moslems and about 28 percent Creoles or racial mixtures, 3 percent Chinese and 2 percent white or Franco-Mauritians. He had a great capacity for creating a sense of community from the disparate ethnic mix.

He had a great capacity to talk to the various elements of the population. In this case, he was able to talk to the Francos who were those who owned the land, were the sugar barons, and encouraged them to use the windfall to invest in light industry and tourism.

Ramgoolam was responsible for the brilliant concept that was developed to make the whole island a free trade zone. In other words, if an investor had a project and wanted to put it in the north, the Mauritian Government would encourage you to do that and the area of your factory would be made a free trade area. So the products you produced were then able to be sold, exported, without duty, and with all the benefits of a specific free trade zone.

One of the things that happened in the 1970s was that this was the beginning of a cooperative connection in textile production between Hong Kong and Malaysia and Mauritius, with the result that by the time I got to Mauritius in 1986, Mauritius was the third largest exporter of knit wear in the world. If you look in the stores in the United States now, certainly if you look around Europe, you will see a vast number of essentially lower-end products (relatively cheap sweaters) made in Mauritius. There are also good products, including apparel, at the middle level. The Limited company which is a major and important merchandising company has a number of suppliers in Mauritius. Benetton, which is an important distributor of textile goods has factories and suppliers in Mauritius. I could go on and on with the companies in America that have connections with Mauritius.

It is interesting, however, that once the textile quota was reached for Mauritian products, instead of moping and sucking their thumb, as is possible to do, the Mauritians aggressively went out looking for other markets. So the Mauritians sell in Brazil, Mexico and are very active in selling textile products in France, Britain, Sweden and Denmark, Italy, Germany. In the European countries they are aiming at the upper end in terms of very well designed products.

So, in short, Mauritius was a very lively environment. It was very interested in the world. One thing about Mauritius, going back to the ethnic mix that I was suggesting earlier, is that they speak a local patois, which is the case in most of the countries where French is one of the languages, called Creole. The Creole in Mauritius is understandable in the Caribbean. The Dutch originally settled the island. Mauritius was uninhabited in the early 17th century. But as the Dutch East Indian Company was able to establish itself on Java as the 17th century wore on, the Dutch shifted their operations from Mauritius to Java. Meanwhile they had introduced the cultivation of sugar using slavery. After they left it was simply a place in the Indian Ocean where the population consisted of refugee slaves. It was not a settled place at the end of the 17th century when the French came in. A number of the French who got to Mauritius were people who fled France in the French Revolution.

Q: I am going to interrupt you here Ron because let's focus on your time there. As Mauritius goes it actually belongs to our first set of posts abroad, 1790 I think was when it was opened because it was a whaling stop.

PALMER: I only wanted to make the point, and this is where all this ends, that there is a very, very lively connection between Mauritius and France. There is equally a lively connection between Mauritius and India and a lively connection between Mauritius and the UK. Within that context there was not so much trade with Africa, but there was a lively connection with South Africa. The Franco-Mauritians were the ones who introduced sugar in South Africa.

The point of this is that in contrast to the sometimes isolated conditions of some islands, this was an island where one could feel cosmopolitan—one was in the world. Things were happening. One of the consequences of the Mauritian interest in tourism was that the US were able to make sales of a couple of 767 aircraft because they were developing Air Mauritius and expanding its routes.

Q: This was the Boeing 767?

PALMER: Yes. The Mauritians were developing routes including a direct flight from London to Mauritius. To give you some idea it is 12 or 14 hours from London. During my time, however, one of the things that I was able to help with was the Malaysian connection. Daim was the Minister of Finance and he came to Mauritius. One of the consequences of the visit was that the Malaysian government decided to put up a bank there, to support the development of a major hotel and a large textile facility.

Now one of the things that the Malaysians had in mind was the use of Mauritius as sort of a stepping off place in the Indian Ocean and toward Southern Africa, which is going to be a very interesting trade environment once things get stable there. The Singaporeans have also been very active in helping the Mauritians to develop products other than their traditional ones, especially in the area of computer software and hardware.

Therefore my time in Mauritius was in some respects not unlike my time in Togo. It was not just promoting the United States, it was also being present when the country was prepared for relations with the United States. My embassy could encourage that kind of development. I think one could see comparable changes in attitudes. We started getting more students going to the United States, starting to get more people traveling to the United States.

This question of personal travel was an interesting problem with people who were accustomed to doing things in a certain way. People in Mauritius thought nothing about going to Paris or to London, which after all is a long way, but the idea of adding another six or seven hours and going to the United States seemed to them to be too far.

It was a period that was extremely rich in personal and policy developments. When I left the government was really quite prepared to make major new steps towards developing relations with the United States. My successor was fortunate enough to be able to get a working visit for the Prime Minister of Mauritius. I have had the great fortune in my career of preparing the way for my successors. In the case of Eyadema in Togo, he got a chance

to go to the United States after I left. Prime Minister Mahathir came to the United States after I left and the same was true of Mauritian Prime Minister Lugnanth. That's okay. In this business it is a relay race.

Q: This is what we professionals learn to live with. We keep working at it and it is a continuing process, not something to make your points and then leave, go back home and check that off and say that in my short term as a diplomat I did such and such.

PALMER: I like the notion that life and especially this kind of professional life really is a relay race. You pass on the baton.

Let me just say that in the time I was in Mauritius the GNP per capita almost doubled. They are up above $2,000 per capita which is very good. They are making major efforts to improve local higher education. It is a problem because building universities is very difficult. As matter stand most of their students go overseas for their degrees. The thing to say ultimately about the relations between the United States and Mauritius is that they are good and improving. Mauritius is one of the few countries where both French and English are official languages. It gives them a great boost in the world.

Q: I take it then there were no major crises while you were on Mauritius?

PALMER: On my watch, no. It was basically an opportunity to improve relations. I would have to say that I had the great boon of being present at a time when the local government and the people were interested in turning or opening their focus to the United States. I found them very receptive and had an extremely interesting and happy three years there. I was able to continue something that I had the good fortune of doing throughout my career, and that was to be in contact with all ethnic groups. That is a feat. I was welcomed in the Hindu community and the Moslem community. I was very supportive of the activities that the Creoles were undertaking. I was very close to the Franco community as I am a reasonably good French speaker. Indeed, it was rather clear to me after having had

three wonderful years that it was going to be very hard for me to improve on Mauritius and perhaps the time had come to think about doing something else.

Q: So you retired in 1989.

PALMER: Yes, in 1989.

Q: One last question. You are now at George Washington University teaching. What do you tell young people who are coming to you about the Foreign Service as a career?

PALMER: I get involved in all the meetings with the Department of State personnel people when they come here and, of course, I see students all the time. I teach US foreign policy as well as a course called “Problems and Prospects in Southeast Asia” as well as doing some lecturing on Africa. So inevitably kids become interested in the Foreign Service. I tell them that it is not for everybody and indeed I really believe that to a certain degree the Foreign Service resembles a religious order in the sense that you have to understand that there is disciplined life. You live in a disciplined environment serving in this case sometimes an unaware and unappreciative public, but still you are expected to be on top of things. So you can't go through life expecting that you are either going to be rewarded or that you necessarily will be always be understood or appreciated. So one must have a great deal of self-confidence and belief in what one is doing. In the fullness of time it will be recognized. The Foreign Service life can be the embodiment of the Protestant Ethic. I had fun and did my job to the best of my ability. No regrets.

Q: Thank you very much Ron. This has been fascinating.

End of interview